

Understanding the Decision-Making Process of Minority Mothers Choosing to Enroll or not
Enroll Their Child(ren) in Catholic High Schools

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Enroll Their Child(ren) in Catholic High Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the decision-making process of minority parents in an urban area as they chose to enroll or not enroll their child(ren) in Catholic high schools. The number of Catholic schools and the number of students attending Catholic schools has declined over the years, especially in urban areas. Research also shows that Catholic schools are especially successful with minority students in urban areas. This study looked at what factors and from where parents gather information as they make a decision.

A qualitative approach was used. Eleven interviews were conducted to collect data. All the parents interviewed were mothers of eighth grades students graduating from one of five Catholic grade schools in Kansas City, Kansas. Ten of the eleven participants were Latina. Six of the parents chose Catholic high schools, while five chose public high schools. To frame this study, literature on the college-choice model was utilized.

The first major theme to emerge from the data was that the Latina mothers mostly gathered information about the schools from personal interactions with family and friends, not published marketing materials. A second finding was that for all the families the most important factor considered when choosing to enroll or not enroll in a Catholic high school were financial considerations. A third finding was that the other two most important factors considered were the academics of the Catholic high schools and faith formation, in that order. A fourth finding was that Catholic schools were perceived as having strong academic programming, although this study did not account for self-selection. The last major finding was that the mothers were the driving force behind the decision-making process.

This study unintentionally focused on Latina mothers. However, the findings here cannot be generalized to any one racial or ethnic group. They can, however, inform the marketing and

recruitment practices of Catholic high schools in urban areas because they help explain the decision-making process of minority mothers, especially Latinas, as they choose to enroll or not enroll in Catholic high schools.

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I would like to thank Lisa Wolf-Wendel, my Committee Chair. Our in person contact was very limited, but her guidance was boundless. Her advice always had the perfect balance of firmness and kindness. I also valued her detailed and thorough feedback. Her faith in me to someday complete this study will always be greatly appreciated.

I would also like to recognize my husband, Ethan. When I started this program we were just dating. By the time I finished we'd celebrated almost four years marriage and the birth of our daughter, Camila. I am grateful for his much needed support and patience.

This would not be complete without acknowledging my grandparents and parents. They taught me early the importance of service to others, education, and the beauty of our culture and history. Most importantly I respect and appreciate all they have done so that I would have the opportunity to pursue any goal I set for myself. Their sacrifices and hard work are my motivation and inspiration. And, thank you to Laura and Letty for keeping a smile on my face.

Working on this was a constant reminder that I am called to work on behalf of women, especially women of color.

This dissertation is dedicated to:

Juan F. Vasquez (1921-2010)

Leandra Vasquez (1929-2016)

Matias R. Vega (1925-2008)

Francisca Vega (1921 and going strong)

Denisse Ramos (1990-2016)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

2 Timothy 4:7

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Driving through the streets of Wyandotte County in eastern Kansas, one quickly catches a glimpse of the current state of Catholic schools in the area, which is representative of Catholic schools across the United States. Three of the Catholic elementary schools shuttered their doors as a result of dwindling enrollment but came together to form one new school. The consolidated school is aptly named Resurrection. One Catholic high school is operating at half the enrollment it did in previous years. This snapshot is representative of declining enrollment trends throughout the United States (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; DeFiore, 2011; Garnett, 2012; Hamilton, 2008; Lackman, 2013; McDonald & Schultz, 2013; Walch, 2003; 2013). Over the past forty years, the number of Catholic schools as well as the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools has declined significantly (Bryk, et al., 2009; DeFiore, 2011; Garnett, 2012; Hamilton, 2008; Lackman, 2013; McDonald & Schultz, 2013; Walch, 2003; 2012). The declining trend began in the 1970s and shows no indication of reversing, leaving the future of remaining Catholic schools unknown. This study is designed to understand the choice process that women, especially Latina women, undertake when deciding to enroll or not enroll in a Catholic high school.

Background of the Study

Catholic educators have grown increasingly alarmed at both the steadily declining number of Catholic schools and the students in those schools (DeFiore, 2011; Garnett, 2012; Hamilton, 2008; McDonald & Schultz, 2013). According to Esty (1974), Grogger, et al., (2000), the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), and the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) (2013), Catholic schools comprise the majority of private schools. As far

back as 1974, Esty commented on the declining enrollment of all private schools (p. 231). Fifteen years ago, Wallace (1999) gave a similar report stating that some “posit that Catholic education is actually at a critical juncture in its history in this country” (p. 464). In the years since these statements, the numbers have only continued to decrease. From 1970 to 2000 there was a 28 percent decrease in the number of Catholic elementary and secondary schools and a 39 percent decrease in the number of students enrolled (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). From 2000 to 2013 the number of Catholic elementary and secondary schools declined another 18 percent and the number of students another 25 percent (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). The NCEA, identified as “a professional membership organization that provides leadership, direction, and service to fulfill the evangelizing, catechizing, and teaching mission of the Church,” provides a variety of services to the Catholic school community including the compilation of comprehensive data (NCEA, 2013). Although information dating back to the 1920s is available, systematic data collection did not begin until 1969 (DiFiore, 2011). Since 1970, the NCEA has published *The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing*, which provides information on the trends in Catholic schools data. Data show that the number of Catholic students peaked at approximately 5.2 million in the 1960s. During the 2013-2014 academic year, there were approximately 2 million students enrolled, signaling a decrease of over 60 percent (see Figure 1). This dramatic decline resulted in the closure of many Catholic schools, from approximately 13,000 schools in the 1960s to 6,685 in the 2013-2014 school year. Urban areas have experienced most of the decline, where Grogger and Neal (2000) and Neal (1997) argue that Catholic schools are most needed and successful. Despite this argument, DeFiore (2011) reports that the number of students attending urban Catholic schools “decreased from 4.5 million in 1965 to just over 1.5 million in 2009” (p. 3). According to the NCEA’s annual report for 2012-

2013, the twelve largest urban dioceses lost 33 percent of their student enrollment during this time period while the remaining Catholic schools lost approximately 25 percent (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). These numbers signal that Catholic enrollments are plummeting and the reasons for this dramatic decline are not clearly understood, especially from the parental perspective.

Evidence suggests that Catholic schools are especially effective in urban areas and with minority students (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Grogger & Neal 2000; Neal 1997; Nguyen, Taylor, & Bradley, 2006). The evidence suggests that students attending Catholic schools graduate high school and attend college at rates higher than their traditional public school (TPS) counterparts (Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Jeynes, 2013; McDonald & Schultz, 2013; Neal, 1997; Nguyen, et al., 2006). Likewise, the literature shows that Catholic school students typically earn higher achievement scores than their TPS counterparts, even after adjusting for the self-selection that occurs when choosing to attend a Catholic school (Coleman, et al., 1982; Morgan, 2001; Neal, 1997; Nguyen, et al., 2006; Sander & Krautmann, 1995). Descriptive statistics from NCEA and the Kansas State Department of Education also suggest that the one Catholic high school in Wyandotte County is much more successful at graduating students than the public schools in the County and sends larger percentages of students to 4-year colleges (KSDE, 2014; McDonald & Schultz, 2013; NCEA, 2013).

Even with these achievement results, the number of Catholic schools and students, especially in urban areas, continues to decline (Buddin, 2012; DeFiore, 2011; Hamilton, 2008; Horning, 2013; Lackman, 2013; McDonald & Schultz, 2013). While there are several models describing K-12 school choice, another model may offer a clearer understanding of the decision-making process: the college choice model (Abdulkaingolu & Sonmez, 2003; Ferreyra &

Kosenok, 2014, Walters, 2012). K-12 school choice models include practices such as assigning students to schools based on location, utilizing lottery systems to determine who is able to enroll, and allowing students to rank schools based on school features. These practices are not used at Catholic high schools, thus making it difficult to apply K-12 school choice models to Catholic high schools. Another difference making it difficult to apply K-12 school choice models to Catholic high schools is the fact that the latter charge tuition and fees. Traditional public schools and charter schools do not. Colleges and universities do charge tuition and do not engage in the assignment and lottery practices previously mentioned, making the college choice model most applicable to Catholic high schools. The college choice model shows that the decision to attend college is influenced by the comments and opinions of significant others in the student's life, financial considerations, the characteristics of the college, and the student's academic ability (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982). This knowledge can be applied to the process of choosing a Catholic high school to identify exactly what is involved in making such a decision and to gain a better understanding of how to stop the flow of students leaving Catholic schools, especially those in urban areas.

Those involved with recruitment and retention at Catholic high schools could find the results of this study particularly informative. In *Story of the Storm: Catholic Elementary Schools from the 1960s to the Present*, it was stated that currently, "no coherent plan to reverse the troubling trends in school and enrollment declines has emerged" (DeFiore, 2011, p. 17). Compounding this situation is the fact that present research does not identify specifically what is influencing minority families', especially Latino, decisions to enroll or not to enroll in Catholic schools located in urban areas, particularly at the secondary level. This research aims to address this void.

Statement of the Problem

In this section, information is provided regarding the state of Catholic schools at the national and local levels, past and present. Locally, the area being studied is Wyandotte County located in eastern Kansas. The County seat is Kansas City, Kansas. Wyandotte Catholic schools are part of the Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas, which encompasses several counties and two metropolitan areas, Kansas City, Kansas, and Topeka, Kansas.

Nationally, by the 1960s, the number of Catholic elementary and secondary students peaked at approximately 5.2 million (DeFiore, 2011; McDonald & Schultz, 2013). The decline since has been steady and at times substantial (DeFiore, 2011; McDonald & Schultz, 2013). The NCEA reports a student enrollment of 4.3 million in 1970, signaling a decrease of almost a million students over a ten year period. There was a very small uptick in enrollment from 1990 to 2000 of 100,000 students over a ten year period. It should also be noted that from 1960 to 1970, the number of secondary students continued to increase reaching a high of just over one million. The total number of students enrolled in Catholic schools has decreased by 62 percent since 1960 (DeFiore, 2011; McDonald & Schultz, 2013). Catholic elementary schools have lost a higher percentage of their students than Catholic high schools (see Figure 3). Since the high point in 1960, sixty-eight percent of elementary school students have exited from Catholic schools, and since the high point in 1970, 42 percent of the secondary students have left Catholic schools. The students from the 1960s were enrolled in about 13,000 schools. Since 1960 the number of schools has declined by approximately 7,000 schools or 52 percent (see Figure 4). (McDonald & Schultz, 2013).

NCEA (2013) identifies six regions within the United States: New England, Mideast, Great Lakes, Plains, Southeast, and West/Far West. Each of these regions has seen a decline in

the number of Catholic schools and students (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). Between the 2002-2003 school year and 2012-2013 school year, the following losses were recorded in total number of schools: New England 118, Mideast 606, Great Lakes 373, Plains 98, Southeast 74, West/Far West 46. As the schools have closed the following declines in total number of student enrolled have been recorded during that same time period: New England 44,644, Mideast 242,120, Great Lakes 136,221, Plains 38,617, Southeast 42,482, and West/Far West 47,453 (McDonald & Schultz, 2013).

Locally, the picture is very similar. Data for the Wyandotte County Catholic schools, obtained from the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas school office (2014), is only available since the 2002-2003 school year and mirrors the national trend. In Catholic elementary schools in the county, the decline in the number of students enrolled is 29 percent, and in Catholic high schools in the County, the decline is 31 percent. In 2002, there were 1,609 students enrolled in the Wyandotte County Catholic elementary schools and in 2012, there were 1,169 students enrolled (see Figure 5). There is one Catholic high school in the County, located in an urban area. The high school had an enrollment of 485 in 2002 and 360 in 2012 (see Figure 6). There were nine elementary schools and now there are five, a loss of 33 percent, as four schools consolidated into one (Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas School Office, 2014).

This dissertation is aimed at identifying the reasons families choose to enroll or not enroll in urban Catholic secondary schools. For this purpose it is imperative to define “urban.” Neal (1997) defines an urban area as a County with a population of at least 250,000. According to the US Census Bureau Data (2010) the population of Wyandotte County in 2012 was 157,505 and the estimated population for 2012 was 159,129. Kansas City, the County seat, and where all the Wyandotte County Catholic schools are located houses approximately 145,000 of those

residents. Based on Neal's definition (1997) Wyandotte County is not urban. However, NCEA (2013) distinguishes between urban and inner-city. Urban is defined as "within the limits of a major city or one with at least 50,000 population," while inner-city is defined as "located within a major city and characterized by a concentration (>40%) of low income inhabitants" (NCEA School Report Form 2013-2014). All of the schools in this study are located in Kansas City, Kansas and met the NCEA criteria for urban. Using information from the national free and reduced lunch program (School Nutrition Program) reported to the Kansas State Department of Education 2013-2014 school year, at five of the six Catholic schools in Wyandotte County and at least 53 percent of their student populations qualifies for the School Nutrition Program based on low-income status. This includes Bishop Ward, where the percentages range from 53 percent to 81 percent. Although this data is based on the school population and there are no boundary requirements, it is known that the majority of the students come from the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the schools, therefore it can be argued that the area also meets the NCEA criteria to be considered inner-city. This information is significant to this research in that the trends regarding the number of schools and students are slightly different for urban and inner-city areas when compared to suburban or rural areas.

Approximately 42 percent of all Catholic schools are located in urban or inner-city areas (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). Forty years ago, 46.5 percent of all Catholic schools were located in these areas, indicating a shift in where Catholic schools are located (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). NCEA data on school closures and consolidations includes information for all schools, as well as all schools minus what they have identified as the "Urban 12," or "the twelve large urban areas of the country" (McDonald & Schultz, 2013, p. 16). While Kansas City and Wyandotte County are not part of the largest urban areas of the country, this information still speaks to what

is happening in all urban areas. Nationally there were 2,090 Catholic schools that were either closed or consolidated between 2000 and 2013, 772 or 37 percent of them from the Urban 12. From this information it can be determined that the numbers for urban Catholic schools are declining at a higher rate than other areas.

When reporting on race ethnicity the NCEA (2013) began using the federal standards in 2012. These standards “mandate that race and Hispanic origin (ethnicity) are separate and distinct concepts and that when collecting these data two different questions must be used,” resulting in two separate sets of data reported (McDonald & Schultz, 2013, p. 21). The 2012-2013 NCEA report indicated that nationally 0.9 percent of students enrolled in Catholic high schools identified as American Indian/Native Alaskan, 5.0 percent as Asian, 8.6 percent as Black, 0.8 percent as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 4.7 percent as multiracial, 73.4 percent as white, and 6.6 percent as unknown (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). According to the federal standards a person of any race can identify as Latino/Hispanic. Of the total number of Catholic high school students in 2012-2013, 12.8 percent identified as Latino/Hispanic (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). The Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas (2014) collects racial and ethnic data using the same federal standards as NCEA. Data available for the Catholic high school in Wyandotte County for 2012-2013 indicate that 39 percent identify as American Indian/Native Alaskan, 1.4 percent as Asian, 9.6 percent as black, 7.9 percent as multiracial, and 42 percent as white. The percentage of those identifying as American Indian/Native Alaskan is related to the 56 percent who also identify as Latino/Hispanic. NCEA considers American Indian to include the native people of Central and South America and identify with these groups. Data are also available on the students who identify as Catholic or non-Catholic. Nationally, NCEA reports that 20.1 percent of students enrolled in Catholic high schools are non-Catholic. In Wyandotte

County, 11.6 percent of the Catholic high school students are non-Catholic. It is clear from the data that the state of Catholic schools is not unique, but it is still concerning. The decline in students has led to the need for this research.

Purpose of the Study

This study used a qualitative approach to ascertain the factors influencing current enrollment patterns in urban Catholic schools, specifically from eighth grade to high school, as it occurs in Wyandotte County. This study will provide a better understanding for why parents and students decide against a Catholic high school despite evidence that Catholic schools are successful with urban and minority students (Coleman, et al., 1982; Neal, 1997; Sander & Krautmann, 1995). If Catholic schools are so successful at educating students in general, especially urban and minority students, one would expect families to enroll in Catholic schools in droves. The fact that this is not happening begs the question of what families consider when choosing a high school. The results of this study will shed light on why parents choose to enroll or not enroll their children in an urban Catholic high school.

Research Questions

This study investigates the following research questions:

1. What factors do parents consider when choosing to enroll or not enroll in a Catholic secondary school in an urban area?
2. What information do parents and students have available to them as they consider their options?
3. What information do parents and students seek out as they consider their options?
4. What information do parents and students actually consider when making a decision?

Importance of the Study

The results of this research could have a significant effect not only on the Catholic high school in Wyandotte County, but also on Catholic high schools at the national level. Wyandotte County, although not among the Urban 12 dioceses as identified by the NCEA, has suffered declining enrollment for some time. This research identifies more precisely the decision-making process of families as they consider high school options. This information can then be used to inform two sectors of Catholic high school education. One sector includes marketing and recruitment efforts, including how information about the schools is communicated. To whom participants respond and what they consult when considering high school choices could affect current marketing and recruitment efforts. The other sector possibly influenced by the results of this study is academic and extracurricular programming. The data gathered could also provide insight into the most important factors parents consider when choosing a high school for their child(ren).

While the circumstances of the Catholic high school in Wyandotte County are unique to that specific community, the results of this research could aid similar Catholic schools in organizing their marketing and recruitment programming as well as academic and extracurricular programming. This research could be especially helpful to Catholic high schools in urban areas that serve similar student populations.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The review of the literature includes previous research on school choice, the success of Catholic schools, and the decline in the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools. The particular information on enrollment trends supports the information presented in Chapter 1 to better describe the current situation of Catholic schools and the purpose of this dissertation. The literature reviewed with respect to the success of Catholic high schools includes research on high school graduation rates, achievement, and college attendance. These topics are looked at comparing Catholic schools to public schools and charter schools. The review of the literature on school choice includes a brief history on the subject, and it is followed by a review of research on charter schools and the possible role they play in the decline of Catholic school enrollment. The last section on school choice reviews research regarding parents' decisions to enroll in religious schools. Suggested reasons for the decline in Catholic school enrollment conclude the literature review.

Success of Catholic Schools

There is significant evidence suggesting that Catholic schools are successful at educating students, some noting that they are more successful than public schools and charter schools (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Jeynes, 2013; Morgan 2001; Neal, 1997; Nguyen, et al., 2006; Sander & Krautmann, 1995). There is also research suggesting Catholic schools are especially effective at educating minority students (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997).

When comparing Catholic school students to those attending other schools, an issue to keep in mind is the role of self-selection. Families make a choice to send their students to

Catholic schools, and that choice alone can signify a greater desire to achieve more. It is argued that this desire results in increased motivation and thus more positive outcomes. This would mean that the results of attending a Catholic school are not necessarily because of the school itself, but because of the motivation of the student and/or family. The studies included here attempt to account for this by using statistical models that remove any factors that may confuse or distort the results. A few of the studies reviewed do not separate Catholic schools from private schools, but Catholic schools make up just over 42 percent of private schools. (McDonald & Schultz, 2013; Sander & Krautmann, 1995).

Overall the findings indicate that students who attend Catholic schools experience better outcomes than those who attend public schools or charter schools (Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Jeynes, 2013; Morgan 2001; Neal, 1997; Nguyen, et al., 2006; Sander & Krautmann, 1995). This is especially true for urban and minority students (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997). Minority students attending an urban Catholic school experience the greatest differences in measured outcomes when compared to their public school and charter school counterparts (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997). The research studies comparing the students most often focus on standardized tests, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates.

The research of Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982) is among the more cited research comparing the outcomes of Catholic and public school students. This research made use of the *High School & Beyond* survey of 1980. The authors acknowledged it would be very difficult to truly isolate the effect of the Catholic schools considering it would be impossible to have the exact same student in both settings at the same time. Generally, student achievement in Catholic schools and other private schools was higher than that of students in public schools (Coleman, et

al., 1982). When controls on family background in statistical analyses were used, the differences in achievement were reduced, but still present. Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1982) also concluded that when looking at students with different backgrounds, Catholic school students still performed better than students at public and other private schools. Likewise, minority students at Catholic schools perform at a closer level to non-minority students. This leads the authors to state, “[a]ltogether, the evidence is strong that the Catholic schools function much closer to the American ideal of the ‘common school,’ educating children from different backgrounds alike, than do public schools” (Coleman, et al., 1982, p. 177).

There is significant research indicating that a Catholic school education has the greatest impact on minority students in urban areas (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997). Grogger and Neal (2000) utilized the National Education Longitudinal Study beginning in 1988 to study the effects of Catholic schools at the secondary level. Comparisons were made not just between Catholic schools and public schools generally, but also between minority students and white students as well as urban and suburban areas. In analyzing the data, Grogger and Neal (2000) sought to “restrict attention to samples that include public schools that are actually alternatives for Catholic-school students and vice versa” (p. 159). This means that only students who could serve as actual counterparts to one another were considered. Their research indicated that Catholic schools have positive effects for all students when it comes to achievement, staying in school, and attending college, but more so for minority and urban students.

In earlier research, Neal (1997) not only accounted for selection bias, but also expanded the definition of “urban” used in the previous research of Coleman, Hoffer and Kilgore (1982). Neal’s (1997) definition of urban includes any County with a population of at least 250,000

residents. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data was used as well as information from the NCEA. Based on his analysis, Neal (1997) concluded that urban minorities who attend Catholic schools benefit from “dramatic effects” including increased high school graduation rates, increased college graduation rates, and increased wages” (p. 108). The benefits are not as substantial for suburban students. Neal attributes this effect on minority students in urban areas to the difference in quality of schools available to the students. He postulates that the public schools located in urban areas are lacking and thus the effect of a Catholic school is greater than in a suburban area where the public schools are of higher quality. Very similar results were seen in the research of Nguyen, Taylor, and Bradley (2006) when considering high school graduation and attendance at a 4-year college. This research did not separate out minority or urban students, but did account for self-selection in attending a Catholic school (Nguyen, et al., 2006).

What follows is a more detailed look at the effect of Catholic schools on high school graduation rates, college attendance and test scores. However, without looking further it is apparent that Catholic schools can have a considerable positive effect on high school students, especially minority students and those living in urban areas.

High school graduation rates. Grogger and Neal (1997) looked at high school graduation rates and found a significant gap between urban minority students in Catholic schools and public schools. Suburban minority students enrolled in Catholic schools were determined to graduate in higher numbers than suburban minority students enrolled in public schools, but it was not statistically significant. The difference in graduation rates between white students at both urban and suburban public and Catholic schools was even less than that for suburban minorities. The research of Nguyen, Taylor, and Bradley (2006) indicated a 14.1 point difference in graduation rates between Catholic school males and public school males who

graduate from high school, with Catholic school males being more likely to graduate from high school. For females, the difference between Catholic school and public school students who graduated from high school was a 13.1 point difference, with Catholic school females also being more likely to graduate from high school.

NCEA (2013) and the Kansas State Department of Education (2014) also report graduation rates, making it possible to compare those of public schools with those of Catholic schools. However, this data has not been subject to the same statistical analysis as the previous data and should therefore only be considered for descriptive purposes. NCEA (2013) uses data from the National Center for Education Statistics to report that that 99.4% of Catholic school students graduate from high school whereas only 78.2% of public school students do. Eighty-five percent of Catholic high school graduates go on to attend college, whereas only 39.5% of public high school graduates do. The Kansas State Department of Education (2014) reports graduation rates by County using a four-year adjusted formula. The results indicate that for the 2012-2013 school year, the Catholic high school in Wyandotte County had a 96% graduation rate. There are four public school districts located in Wyandotte County. The high school graduation rates for those public school districts were as follows: 81.6%, 95.0%, 84.2%, and 65.5%. Although most of the students attending the Catholic high school come from the public district with a graduation rate of 65.5%, the Catholic high school does enroll students from each of the other public school districts. For that reason, rates for all four of the public school districts are noted because each of these is a realistic alternative for the Catholic school students. The public school district with the highest graduation rate also has the lowest percentage of students considered low-income based on participation in the School Nutrition Program (21.8% for the 2012-2013 school year). Bishop Ward's (BW) percentage of students participating in the School

Nutrition Program for the same year was 55.08 percent. The Catholic high school has the highest graduation rates of all the Wyandotte County schools for Black and Hispanic students, with the exception of the school district with the lowest percent of students considered low-income. The Catholic high school has an average graduation rate for all Black and Hispanic students of 98.8 percent and the graduation rate for the school district with the lowest percent of students receiving free or reduced meal is 98.5 percent. The graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students at the other public school districts are 83.9, 81.9, and 67.8 percent (KSDE, 2014). When looking at the high school graduation rates for minority students for each public school district and the Catholic school it is obvious they mirror the conclusions made previously that Catholic schooling is especially beneficial for minority students.

College attendance. Grogger and Neal (1997) found that urban minorities in Catholic schools attended college at a significantly higher rate than their public school counterparts. Grogger and Neal (1997) also report a strong link between a Catholic education and college attendance for suburban minorities. Again the gap between white urban students and white suburban students was not as great. Nguyen, Taylor, and Bradley (2006), reporting on 4-year college enrollment, stated that the difference between Catholic school and public school males who attended college was 27.1 points while the difference among females was 29.3 points. These are significant differences.

Again, information provided by NCEA and KSDE should only be considered descriptive. NCEA, using data as recent as 2012, reports that 84.9% of Catholic school students attended 4-year colleges, compared to 39.5% of public school students (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). KSDE collects data for both students who plan on attending a 4-year college or a 2-year college. For the 2012-2013 school year, the approximate percentages of students attending a Wyandotte

County public school planning to attend a 4-year college were: >1%, 37%, 26%, and 15%. The percentage of students planning to attend a 4-year college for the Catholic high school in Wyandotte County was 43%. The data available for Black and Hispanic students show similar outcomes, with the Catholic high school having the highest percentage of these students attending a 4-year college, which was 89%.

Test scores. In terms of test scores, Grogger and Neal (1997), determined that all Catholic school students had higher test scores compared to public school students, but the difference was not as nearly as great as that for high school graduation and college attendance. This research portrays a positive outcome for all students who attend Catholic schools in urban and suburban areas, but minority students who attend Catholic schools in urban areas appear to have the most to gain. Nguyen, Taylor, and Bradley (2006) concluded that Catholic schooling had the greatest effect on males and math scores. A very limited effect was noted for reading scores. Morgan (2001) used extensive statistical analyses to look at the effect of a Catholic education while accounting for certain counterfactuals. It was concluded that both reading and math scores for Catholic school students were better than those of public school students. After accounting for self-selection into a Catholic school the effect was smaller, but still present.

Regarding such research, Jeynes (2012) published a report that showed that students who attend religious schools “perform better than their counterparts who are in public schools...In contrast, youth attending charter schools on average do not perform any better than their counterparts in [traditional public school]” (Jeynes, 2012, p. 324) These results were indicative of academic and behavioral outcomes. The work of Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1995) used advanced statistical models to compare the effects of public and Catholic schools. They concluded that although family background and differences in students play a role in

achievement, Catholic high schools produce “desirable effects” (Bryk, et al., 1995, p. 294). Related to this research is that of Brinig and Garnett (2010) which also highlights the “high quality education” Catholic schools have provided particularly for low-income and minority students (p. 901).

The research presented here is integral to the current study because if Catholic schools are successful with students, especially minority and urban students, and in comparison to public and charter schools, the decline in enrollment and closings of schools would not be expected. Knowing that Catholic school enrollment is declining as it is forces the question of what information and factors parents seek out and consider when choosing to enroll or not enroll in a Catholic high school.

School Choice

Carpenter and Kafer (2012) outline a history of school choice, demonstrating a shift in the motivation behind wanting more options. During the colonial period school choice was motivated by religious freedom, but today it is motivated by desire to enroll children in schools that are not underperforming or by a desire for “freedom from state-imposed educational failure” (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012, p. 347).

According to Carpenter and Kafer (2012) school choice existed even before the establishment of public schools as they are known today. The colonial period saw numerous churches of various faiths operating independent schools allowing parents to choose one according to their personal beliefs and practices. After the U.S. Civil War the number of state-supported “common schools” increased and became the prevalent type of school (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012; Hunt & Walch, 2010; Walch, 2003). The common schools supported and promoted the Protestant faith. In response to this, Catholic and other non-Catholic private schools were

established. However, these schools did not receive government funding as did the common schools, so those who attended did so because they could afford the tuition or because they received assistance from charitable organizations.

Among the first Supreme Court cases involving school choice was that of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* from 1925. In this case the Supreme Court ruled against an Oregon law requiring all students to attend public schools (Carpenter and Kafer, 2012; Imber & van Geel, 2009; Walch, 2003). The 1947 case of *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township* was the first granting parents financial assistance in the form of reimbursement for transportation expenses incurred if they chose to send their child(ren) to religious schools (Carpenter & Kafe, 2012; Walch, 2003).

Forman (2005) argues that during the 1960s school choice became a solution to the underperforming schools that minority and low-income students attended. This motivation behind school choice gained strength as the years progressed. By the 1990s, several programs allowed students to move to another school if their own was not considered up to standard. The different approaches included both tax incentives and voucher programs which allowed students to attend non-public schools. Examples include the Milwaukee Private School Choice Program (formerly Milwaukee Parental Choice Program), Cleveland Scholarship Program, Florida's Opportunity Scholarship Program, and Illinois tax credit program. In 2014, Kansas passed the Tax-Credit Scholarship (HB 2506) bill giving tax credits to corporations that donate money for scholarships going to students from underperforming public schools to attend private schools. Families must also qualify for free lunch benefits through the federal school lunch program to be eligible for the scholarship. The 2016-2017 school year will be the second year of this program. The Wyandotte County schools, including BW, are considered high impact schools because of

the number of families expected to leave TPS to attend the Catholic schools. For the 2015-2016 school year there were 99 students in 12 schools who received tax-credit scholarships. For the 2016-2017 school year 258 students at 14 schools had applied for the tax-credit scholarship. The schools represented by these numbers include Catholic schools in Wyandotte County as well as other counties.

School choice may be one reason for the declining numbers of Catholic schools and students (Buddin, 2012; Hamilton, 2008; Horning, 2013; Lackman, 2013). Families have more school options than ever before. Besides public and Catholic schools, families also have charter schools to choose from. Charter schools are especially prevalent in urban or inner-city areas, where Catholic schools have seen a higher rate of decline compared to other areas (DeFiore, 2011; Hamilton, 2008; Horning, 2013; McDonald & Schultz, 2013). In 2009-2010, 55% of charter schools were located in cities compared to the remaining 45% located in suburbs, towns, and rural areas (Garnett, 2012). It has been said that “[c]harter schools, rather than Catholic schools, are becoming the dominant schools of choice in many inner city communities” (Garnett, 2012, p. 1894). The number of students enrolled in charter schools quadrupled from less than a million to 1.6 million, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (Figure 7). Figure 8 depicts the rate of change between Catholic school enrollment and charter school enrollment. It is evident that charter schools are growing while Catholic schools are dwindling in size. In 2009-2010, there were 5,000 charter schools in the United States. In 2010 alone, 465 new charter schools opened, a nearly 9% increase over 2009 (Garnett, 2012).

Forty-two percent of Catholic schools are located in urban areas working with students from low-income families and minority groups (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). According to the NCEA’s Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing, despite losing students

the Catholic “church has not lost sight of its commitment to educate children, particularly those of the poor, within the inner cities and urban areas” (McDonald & Schultz, 2013). Charter schools, like Catholic schools, have positioned themselves to take on specific missions. Garnett (2012), investigating the future of school choice between charter schools and Catholic schools, reported that “over 55% of charter school students attend schools that are located in urban areas, and over 60% of students enrolled in charter schools are racial minorities” (p. 1899). This results in 26% of charter schools reporting they serve the poor and urban student populations (Garnett, 2012).

Vouchers are another component of school choice. Research on school vouchers offers insight into school choice and what parents want for their children. The success, failures, trends, and controversies are relevant to investigating how parents make decisions about where to enroll their children. Ferrerya (2007) completed an analysis using models to estimate the effect of private school vouchers in multidistrict economies. Universal vouchers that could be used at any type of school and vouchers that could only be used at nonsectarian schools were studied. It was determined that universal vouchers allowed more households to attend the school of their choice and that Catholic schools “attract[ed] an increasing number of non-Catholics with a preference for Catholic schools” (Ferrerya, 2007, p. 806) This suggests that given the opportunity and means, parents, including non-Catholics, would choose Catholic schools for their children. Vouchers are not available in Kansas, but there is the Tax-Credit Scholarship program previously mentioned. This program is only in its second year and information regarding how many Catholic and non-Catholics applied is not available.

Other research reiterates the findings of Ferrerya (2007), that the decision to attend a religious school is not always religiously motivated (Ji & Boyatt, 2007; Mainda, 2002; Suhy

2012). Ji and Boyatt (2007) conducted research that specifically looked at the reasons why parents choose a religious school for their children. The parents in the work of Ji and Boyatt (2007) enrolled their children in five protestant schools in Southern California and were described as “financially better off than the general population” (p. 161). It should also be noted that parents in general had a “high doctrinal belief” indicating that religion, religious practices, and religious education were important to them (Ji & Boyatt, 2007, p. 161). While some of the demographics were considerably different from the participants in Ferrerya’s (2007) study, this research still provides relevant insight into how parents decide where to enroll their students. The results indicated that for the parents in this study, religious education was the most important reason for choosing a religious school, followed by academic quality and school safety (Ferrerya, 2007, p. 165). The research also yielded interesting results in the percentage of families (15%) living below or at the poverty line, but who still enrolled at the protestant schools. This indicated that despite financial limitations, some families are willing to pay tuition in order for them to receive religious education.

Mainda (2002) sought to investigate the reasons parents choose whether or not to enroll their students in Seventh-Day Adventist schools (referred to as Adventist schools from here on). While all of the participants attended Adventist churches some had their children enrolled in Adventist schools and others did not. Mainda (2002) asked questions that ascertained the relevance of the following factors in the choice to enroll or not enroll in an Adventist school: importance of spirituality, academic program, cost of schooling, peer influences, social factors, proximity, safety, and awareness of Adventist schools. It was found that spirituality was the most significant factor. However, those parents who enrolled their children in public schools did not believe spirituality was as significant as those who did. The next most significant factors

were those relating to financial considerations. The availability of financial aid was very important and played a considerable role in whether or not a parent would enroll their child in an Adventist school. Those parents who did believe the cost of schooling was worth it. It was clear from the data that, “if costs were lower in Adventist schools, then more children would attend” (Mainda, 2002, p. 197). The next most important factor in deciding whether or not to attend an Adventist school was the academic programming available to students at the different schools. The influence of other people in the decision-making process was not as significant a factor, but Mainda (2002) did determine that the influence of the children in the decision-making process was stronger than that of other adults. Social factors, proximity, safety, and awareness were less significant.

Suhy (2012) came to similar conclusions as Mainda (2002). In a qualitative study of the perceptions of Latino families towards Catholic education in Dallas, Texas, Suhy (2012) determined the most common themes to be that the Catholic schools were academically superior to the local public schools, that the families saw Catholic education as cost prohibitive, and that the Catholic schools were “necessary for the continued faith development of their children” (p. 287). While Suhy did not rank these factors as did Mainda (2002) and Ji and Boyatt (2007), it is still notable that the factors were so similar. In regards to the academics available at the Catholic schools, the participants “mentioned that they were aware of the significant difference in quality of education between area Catholic schools and [the local public school district]” (Suhy, 2012, p. 282). The participants also indicated that they believed the type of education available at a Catholic school was the type needed to attain goals such as college acceptance. The theme of the Catholic schools being cost prohibitive arose in response to several of the interview questions asked. Suhy (2012) explained that “while [the parents] consider it the best educational option for

their children they cannot afford the cost” (p. 282). A majority of the parents stated they would need to “find a second or third job in order to afford Catholic schools” (Suhy, 2012, p. 286). In regards to faith development, Suhy asked about both instruction during the school day as well as instruction through Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes that are open to all church members and take place after regular school hours. The results showed that participants believed the best faith development was through instruction at a Catholic school or CCD classes.

While the work of Ferrerya (2007), Ji and Boyatt (2007), and Mainda (2002) are not directly related to Catholic education they inform this study because they address the decision-making process, how and why parents choose one school over another, when one of those options is a religious school. That the studies also address parent attitudes towards the importance of spirituality or religious formation is especially important, even if the Catholic faith is not the included religion. The work of Suhy (2012) is directly related to this study in that it specifically addresses the perspective of minority families, in this case Latino families, on Catholic education, as well as the other factors listed above.

Reasons for decline in enrollment. Buddin (2012) summarizes the various factors that are believed to have contributed over the years to the decline in Catholic school enrollment at the elementary and secondary levels as being the sex abuse scandal, rise in tuition costs, and increase in the number of charter schools (p. 3). Buddin (2012), DeFiore (2011), and Walch (2003) also comment specifically on the change in numbers at urban Catholic schools saying that this is due to the migration of families from urban to suburban areas. In recent years the effect of charter schools on Catholic school enrollment has received most of the attention, possibly due to the attention given charter schools in general (Buddin, 2012; Hamilton, 2008; Horning, 2013; Lackman, 2013).

Buddin (2012) contends that the enrollment of private schools in urban school districts is more likely to suffer than that of private schools in non-urban school districts. Buddin (2012) states that “Catholic schools seem particularly vulnerable...” (p. 1). This study concluded that 15 percent of charter school students in urban areas come from private schools, including Catholic schools. Approximately 6 percent of students attending charter high schools come from Catholic high schools. Lackman (2013) claims that while charter schools affect the enrollment of all private schools, that of Catholic schools has been ‘devastated’” (p. 3). Furthermore, Lackman (2013), whose research focuses on New York State, claims that for every charter school that has opened in New York a Catholic school has closed. It is reported that Catholic school enrollment in New York state declined 34% after the establishment of charter schools. Others have also referenced that some Catholic schools have actually converted to charter schools in an attempt to remain open, by receiving public funding (Hamilton, 2008; Horning, 2013; Walch, 2012). These “Catholic” charter schools are said to be religious only in name. Lackman (2013), DeFiore (2011) and Buddin (2012) also contend that the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal beginning in the late 1980s and carrying in to the early 2000s negatively affected Catholic school enrollment. DeFiore (2011) states, “the negative perceptions of the Church and the billions in settlements...unavoidably had a deleterious impact both on school enrollments and school finances, most heavily on those dependent on diocesan subsidies – typically inner city schools” (p. 7-8).

As this study looks at the decision-making process of parents whose children are going from eighth grade to high school, it is a possibility that one of these factors may influence their choice. They may choose a charter school or are hesitant to send their child(ren) to schools with

such a negative stain in their history. For this reason the information here is important to this study.

Theoretical Framework

College choice. This section focuses on college choice models that outline the process a student undertakes as they decide on whether or not to attend college and if so, which to attend. While this study researches the choice to attend a Catholic high school, the college choice process is relevant because a student has to self-select to attend a Catholic high school. There is a choice and thus a process involved. This information is also relevant in that, according to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), studies looking at the college choice process arose out of the need for colleges and universities to actively compete for students. In order to recruit students, colleges and universities turned to market-oriented research for insight into developing their own market strategies. Market research and marketing strategies are not new to Catholic schools. In fact, there are several organizations that offer enrollment management services with marketing and recruitment among them. These organizations assist Catholic schools in doing exactly what college and universities used research on the college choice process to do – recruit more students. Examples of such organizations are Catholic School Management, Institute of School & Parish Development, and Partners in Mission. Therefore, research pertaining to the process a student goes through when choosing to attend college and which to attend is pertinent to this study.

Among the most cited college choice model is that of Chapman (1982), who states that “to understand a student’s choice of which college to attend, it is necessary to take into account both background and current characteristics of the student, the student’s family, and the characteristics of the college” (p. 492). Chapman suggests that the decision on which college to

attend is influenced by a combination of student characteristics and external influences. The external influences are significant people in the student's life, the fixed characteristics of the institution, and the institution's own efforts to communicate with the prospective students (Chapman, 1982). The student characteristics include aptitude, educational aspirations, high school performance, and socioeconomic status, with the latter being very important.

Socioeconomic status is important because it can determine realistic options for the student. The significant people who can influence the college choice are parents/family, friends, and high school personnel. These people impact the decision process in that:

1. Their comments shape the students' expectations of what a particular college is like;
2. They may offer direct advice as to where the student should go to college;
3. Close friends can influence where the friends themselves decide to go to college

(Chapman, 1982, p. 495).

The influencing college characteristics include cost, location, and available programs. The efforts of the college to communicate with the students include written information, campus visits, and admissions/recruiting activities. These efforts can be described as a marketing approach to attracting and securing students.

Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) identified factors influencing the college choice similar to those of Chapman. Common factors are parental encouragement, financial considerations, the student's aspirations, and the student's academic abilities. An additional factor included in their model is the "saliency of institutions," or the preference for a particular college or university based on its various features and characteristics (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000, p. 6). Parental encouragement was described as "motivational" in regards to the expectations parents hold for

their students and “proactive” in terms of involvement in school activities, conversations about college, and saving for college.

Mainda’s (2002) research should be mentioned again when describing school choice models. In this model Mainda focused on the roles spirituality, academic program, cost of schooling, peer influences, social factors, proximity, safety, and awareness played when parents were deciding whether or not to enroll in Seventh Day Adventist schools. These factors are very similar to those mentioned by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Chapman (1982), and La Nasa and Cabrera (2000).

While these models describe the factors influencing the college choice process they can also be applied to the process of choosing whether or not to attend a Catholic high school. The factors that can most be applied to the process of thinking about a Catholic high school are the influence of significant people in the student’s life, financial considerations, and the characteristics of the school. Ultimately the parent is who will more than likely pay tuition costs to attend a Catholic high school, but a young teenager can be easily influenced by his/her peers and what high schools those peers are considering or what they say about a particular school. Due to the fact that most Catholic school students pay some amount of tuition the costs of the school must be taken into account. If a family determines that they simply cannot afford the tuition, even with financial aid, then the decision may be made to attend a public or charter high school. An incoming high school student may be focused on a particular sport or extracurricular activity and thus influenced by whether or not the Catholic high school offers that sport or activity.

This conceptual framework is the foundation of the questions used in the interview protocol. Participants will be asked general questions regarding their decision making process in

order to elicit information on who or what influenced their decision to enroll or not enroll their student in a Catholic high school. The answers to these questions may lead to responses similar to those in the studies mentioned here. Due to the similarities between college/universities and Catholic high schools it is suspected that many of the same factors will be mentioned as presented in this research.

Conclusion

The information here provides the framework through which this research will be conducted. School choice is more prevalent now than ever before. The review of enrollment trends indicate that Catholic schools are declining, especially in urban and inner-city areas, despite strong evidence that that they are most effective in these areas. To better understand why this is happening the college choice model will be applied at the high school level. Enrolling in a Catholic high school is similar to choosing a college in that there are several influential factors and people.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study explores the enrollment trends of Catholic schools in an urban setting. The study used a case study with in-depth qualitative interviews. This chapter explains why this approach to the research was chosen, and discusses the design of the study, the methodological approach, the site selection, the role of the researcher and researcher's perspective, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, and limitations.

Research Design

This research was completed as a case study with data collected through individual in-depth qualitative interviews. The purpose of this study is to explore what is happening in a particular community and more specifically, the decision-making process of minority parents whose child(ren) attended feeder schools for the one Catholic high school in this urban community. The focus on this one school in one community constitutes a case study. This research is exploratory in that this particular topic has not been previously studied in depth, especially for this type of community (Babbie, 2004). The goal is to gain a general understanding of the enrollment trends and decision-making processes, and to also gather more in depth information and details from a small sub-sample in order to assemble as complete a picture of what is occurring as possible. For this reason, it is best to use qualitative research methods, specifically interviews. Interviews provide the opportunity to understand the “meaning [the respondents] attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p 5).

Methodological approach: Qualitative method. The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making process of minority parents as they choose to enroll or not enroll their child(ren) in a Catholic high school. This research is best treated as a case study because

attention is limited to one community (Merriam, 2009). The reason for focusing on one community is two-fold. One reason is simply because of access to this particular community. The other is because each Catholic school or archdiocese is unique in the specific factors affecting their enrollment trends. While other Catholic communities may be able to draw some insight from this study the results cannot be generalized. The results may be helpful to other Catholic schools located in urban areas, but cannot be applied literally.

The qualitative approach to this study consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews with minority parents whose children completed the eighth grade at a one of five Catholic elementary schools in Wyandotte County, which are considered feeder schools for the Catholic high school in the same County. The interviews provided the opportunity to gather details to answers that might have otherwise been missed using other methods. During the interviews a deeper understanding of “how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” was deduced (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). This was possible because during the interviews the researcher collects “narratives, descriptions, and interpretations” from the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 7). This information was then combined in a systematic way into a description of the process of deciding whether or not to enroll in a Catholic high school. Rubin and Rubin (2012) explain that in-depth qualitative interviews are naturalistic in that they allow the researcher and participant to simply talk and through that conversation the researcher is able to gather needed data. An environment conducive to a conversation can be established with a semi-structured interview protocol and the responsive interview model. The semi-structured interview protocol consists of a limited number of questions. These questions allow the researcher to guide the conversation and ask appropriate follow-up questions as needed (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The responsive interview

model gives the researcher the ability to modify any questions as needed based on participant answers in order to keep the conversation going.

While this research could have been completed using another approach, it was best to utilize a qualitative one. Doing so resulted in descriptive details that construct a more complete understanding of the process of deciding whether or not to enroll in a Catholic high school, not just the final decision. Data was collected from the parent or guardian of the student. Questions were asked to determine how much influence the student had on the decision, but only the parent or guardian participated in the study.

Site selection: Bishop Ward. The site selected as an initiation point for this research was Bishop Ward High School (BW), a member of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, which encompasses ten counties. These counties include rural, suburban, and urban areas. BW is the single Catholic high school located in Wyandotte County in Kansas. Wyandotte County includes Kansas City which is considered an inner-city area. BW first opened in 1908 and has been at its present location since 1931. BW's mission statements reads: Bishop Ward High School provides a quality, Catholic, college-preparatory education in a Christ-centered community that nurtures the body, mind, and soul of each student (Bishop Ward High School, 2015).

Currently BW serves a very different population than it did in the past. Previous families were mostly from Eastern European countries such as Poland, Croatia, Slovenia, and Slovakia. Now the school has a student population that is approximately 60% Latino/Hispanic. The rest of the student population is mostly White/non-Hispanic with a small African-American population and an even smaller Asian population. Approximately 60% of BW students qualify for free or reduced school meals according to the Kansas School Nutrition Program.

BW had its largest student enrollment during the early 1970s, approximately 860 students. Current staff members who attended the school themselves explain that there were two school sessions per day, two students per locker, and an up staircase and a down staircase, all as means to accommodate the number of students (Bishop Ward High School, 2015). During the 2013-2014 academic year, the school had a student body of 360. An ideal enrollment would be 475-500 students.

At the time of the study, BW had a faculty of 35 teachers and two counselors. In addition to the teaching staff there was also an administration of five consisting of the school president, principal, assistant principal, dean of students/athletic director, and network administrator. Support staff included a school secretary/attendance clerk, nurse/athletic secretary, two food service employees, a facilities director, one custodian, and numerous outside coaches.

There is a Business Office with three employees, two full-time and one part-time. The Business Office is responsible for all the financial operations of school as well as all transactions regarding tuition. The Business Manager, in conjunction with members of the administration, sets the tuition amount annually and spends a considerable amount of time working with families to establish payments plans and collecting tuition. Tuition for the 2014-2015 school year was set at \$8,260. Only about 5% of students paid the full tuition amount. Most, approximately 70%, pay a minimum; which was \$3,200. There are other expenses a student must pay including an enrollment fee, book fees, and school uniforms. Students are also responsible for two student fundraisers a year. Students can participate by asking family and friends to buy an item or students can also opt out of participating by paying \$150, the amount each student is expected to contribute to the fundraisers. All of the expenses can be paid over a twelve-month period.

BW offers financial aid and scholarships. This is made possible through the work of the Development Office, which at the time of the study consisted of seven employees, three full-time and four part-time. This office is responsible for all fundraising efforts that include an endowment, annual auction, annual golf tournament, major gifts, and the student fundraisers. Currently the endowment has reached approximately \$5 million dollars with a goal of \$10 million. The endowment is driven mostly by major gifts, but many donors give smaller amounts.

Also included in the activities of the Development Office is all student recruitment. The recruitment manager is charged with coordinating all recruiting events, the scheduling of the High School Placement Test (HSPT) that all incoming freshmen must take, and organizing Enrollment Nights during which new students finalize enrollment paperwork. Recruiting events include visiting all five Catholic grade schools located in Wyandotte County. These schools are considered “feeder” or “partner” schools. The school president, principal, and recruitment manager visit each school during the early Fall to talk to each individual eighth grade student about attending BW. All eighth grade students at the partner schools participate in the Shadow Day Program during which they spend the day at BW shadowing a current student. Recruitment activities also include bringing the grade school students into the high school throughout the school year for events such the drama club performances, B and Day, a chess tournament, a math tournament, and a science fair. Other recruitment activities include visiting charter schools located in Kansas City, Missouri, attending events at the parishes in Wyandotte County, and hosting summer camps. The majority of the recruitment activities have been the same for several years, but new activities have been held recently. These include a 7th/8th grade Fun Day and “Middle School Night” at athletic events.

The admissions process at BW for incoming freshmen begins with the HSPT which all students are required to take. The first test is offered in January, but other dates are selected to accommodate the ongoing recruitment process. After students take the HSPT, they continue through the enrollment process, which includes a financial aid application, an enrollment agreement (demographic information), class selections, and collection of the enrollment fee. There are two Enrollment Nights held during February during which families can complete the entire process. Depending on a family's availability this process can be completed during an Enrollment Night or require an appointment at another time. For some families, the enrollment process takes several months.

Other schools. While this study focused on Catholic elementary schools feeding into the one Catholic high school in Wyandotte County, there were several other high schools in the Kansas City metro area that became a part of this study once the interviews began. Information for the following schools is based largely on what is available on in the public domain such as the school website and the websites for the respective state departments of education.

Cristo Rey. Cristo Rey Kansas City (CR), which is part of a national network of high schools, is located in Kansas City, Missouri. The school does not have residency requirements so students living in Kansas are able to attend the school. This means that a student graduating eighth grade from one of the Wyandotte County Catholic grades schools may enroll at CR. The first CR school was opened in Chicago in 1996 when Father John Foley “established a college prep high school that immigrant families could afford by establishing a work partnership with local corporations to employ the students in exchange for tuition payments” (Aldana, 2015, p. 179). It is a unique approach to funding a Catholic education in that the high schools employ a corporate work study program where students take a full set of college-preparatory classes for

four years while working one day each week to “fund the majority of their tuition” (Cristo Rey, 2015). Aldana (2015) reports that the “Cristo Rey Network of schools signals an innovation in the field of Catholic education, especially for urban Catholic schools” (p. 178). According to the CR network website (2015), the schools are the “largest network of high schools in the United States whose enrollment is limited to low-income youth.” Also according to the network website (2015), the work experience not only allows the students to contribute financially to their own education, but it “reinforces in them the thinking strategies and lifelong learning behaviors emphasized in the classroom.” The work study positions fund the majority of a student’s tuition thus greatly reducing a student’s family contribution to the tuition. This results in some families paying as little as \$20 a month in tuition. The CR Kansas City website lists approximately 125 work study partners. They represent a variety of industries such as health care, education, science and engineering, legal, finance, and non-profit organizations.

The network schools follow ten Mission Effectiveness Standards:

- 1) Is explicitly Catholic in mission and enjoys Church approval.
- 2) Serves only economically disadvantaged students. The school is open to students of various faiths and cultures.
- 3) Is family centered and plays an active role in the local community.
- 4) Shall prepare all of its students to enter and graduate from college.
- 5) Requires participation by all students in the work-study program. All students must be 14 years by September 1st.
- 6) Integrates the learning present in its work program, classroom, and extracurricular experiences for the fullest benefit of its student workers.

- 7) Has an effective administrative and board structure as well as complies with all applicable state and federal laws.
- 8) Is financially sound and at full enrollment the school is primarily dependent on revenue from the work-study program to meet operating expenses. In addition, the school maintain a comprehensive advancement program to ensure financial stability.
- 9) Supports its graduates' efforts to obtain a college degree.
- 10) Is an active participant in the collaboration, support, and development of the CR Network (Cristo Rey, 2015).

It was difficult to gather statistical information for CR Kansas City specifically, but there is information at the national level available publicly on the network website. According to the website (2015), 88% of all CR students who graduated in 2013 enrolled in college. The information available online did not differentiate according to race or ethnicity. From the school's social media presence, it appears 100% of the seniors were accepted into college. However, it is unclear how many went to two-year college and how many to four-year colleges.

Sumner Academy of Arts and Science. Sumner Academy of Arts and Science is a magnet school located in Kansas City, Kansas and is part of the Kansas City Kansas Public School district. All information provided here was obtained from the school website (Sumner, 2015), the district website (KCKPS.org, 2015), and the Kansas Department of Education website (KSDE.org, 2015). The Sumner mission statement says, "Sumner Academy of Arts and Sciences is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School that creates a culture of global thinking, which serves students beyond the classroom by developing knowledgeable, inquiring and caring young people" (Sumner, 2015). It is one of eight schools in the greater Kansas City metro area offering the IB program, and it is one of the three schools located on the Kansas side

of the metro area. Sumner is known for the strength of its arts program. Sumner has standards for admission that include academic, attendance, and behavior criteria. The school serves students in grades 8th – 12th. Many students enter as 8th graders. Seventh grade students currently attending schools in the school district and meeting the criteria automatically receive invitations to enroll. Seventh grade students attending other schools, such as the area Catholic schools, are required to submit an application. Eighth grade students at any school who wish to enroll for their freshman year of high school must submit an application (Sumner, 2015).

According to the KSDE website, for the 2012-2013 school year (the same year other data was available for the other schools) Sumner Academy had 97.1% of its student body qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the students was 38% Black, 36.3% Hispanic, and 18.4% White. The school has a 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for 2012 was 97.8%. The district rate for the same 4-year adjusted cohort is 66.8%. The graduation rates by race and ethnicity were 95% for Hispanic students and 100% for Black students. For the district the rates were 63.2% for Hispanic students and 71.9% for Black students. The dropout rate for the 2012-2013 school year was not available, but it was for the 2014-2015 school year, which was 0.1%. The dropout rate for the district for the same year was 6% (KSDE.org, 2015). Students attending Sumner typically have better outcomes than those attending TPS in the district.

Conducting the Study

Role of researcher. As a former member of the administration at BW and current principal of one of the Catholic grade schools in Wyandotte County, I am committed to increasing the student enrollment because I believe in the mission of Catholic schools and have a desire for that mission to reach as many families as possible. Therefore, I have a strong interest

in the results of this research. The information gathered through this research has the potential to significantly affect how BW organizes their recruitment efforts and marketing strategies.

This research is of particular interest to me because of what I observed regarding recruitment and enrollment during my time at BW. At BW, I had the privilege of working with the administration, the Business Office, and the Development Office. The Development Office played the largest role in recruitment and enrollment. The Recruiter was a part of the development office and reported directly to the Director of Development and the School President. The administration was involved in that they supported the recruitment events, the High School Placement Test dates, the Enrollment Nights, and reviewed student records as needed. The Business Office distributed, collected, and processed the applications for financial aid that approximately 90% of the incoming families submit. I was also involved in all the activities mentioned above because I am English/Spanish bilingual and interpreted for families on a regular basis. This resulted in me being very knowledgeable on a variety of topics and involved in all aspects of the recruitment and enrollment process. As a result, I was able to observe first-hand the decreasing number of students initiating the application process and eventually enrolling at BW. I also witnessed how the Development Office, Business Office, and administration reacted to this situation. For these reasons, I am highly interested in the factors affecting current enrollment trends at the Catholic schools in Wyandotte County.

In my professional role at BW, I may have interacted with the children of the parents I eventually interviewed. As a one-time employee of BW, I also knew that I had to be very clear with each participant that their answers would be kept confidential, that the completion of the interviews was for my educational purposes and while the final product of my research may influence BW recruitment practices in the future it was not in any way meant to affect their

current decisions or relationships with BW. During the interviews I worked hard to show my genuine interest in any of the schools which with the participants interacted. I believed this helped to diminish any unintentional bias on my part, to convey a neutral position, and to help the participants give honest answers. I do believe that the parents appreciated someone being interested in their experiences and gave truthful answers. I also believe that because the families were all from minority ethnic backgrounds they were more open to talking to another minority. Although it was not intentional in the original design of the research study, all the interviewees were mothers and I believe my being a minority woman also greatly contributed to the willingness of the mothers to speak to with me.

Protection of human subjects. In accordance with the expectations of the University of Kansas, measures were taken to protect the human subjects of this research study. An informed consent approved by the University of Kansas was created and used. During initial phone conversations participants were told that they would be asked to sign this form assuring them that I would respect their privacy and keep identifying information and their answers confidential. Participants were informed that in the final product their names and their children's names would not be used. I also let participants know that despite my involvement with BW and being currently employed at one of the feeder Catholic elementary schools, I would not share with anyone the purpose of our visit, especially those that took place in my office at the grade school. While I acquired their contact information from the Archdiocese School Office no one knew who I eventually contacted or with whom I scheduled interviews.

Sampling. Babbie (2004) defines purposeful sampling as “a type of non-probability sampling in which you select the units to be observed on the basis of your own judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative” (p. 183). This study made use of

purposeful sampling because I chose participants based on my knowledge of the population and the purpose of the study. Each year the Archdiocesan school office collects data on where each 8th grader graduating from a one of the five Catholic grade schools in Wyandotte County is attending high school and I was given written permission by the Superintendent to use this information to contact possible interview participants.

As of mid-June 2015 there are approximately 30 students from the five feeder schools who are not attending a Catholic high school. Many of the families attending BW are legacy families, meaning one or both parents graduated from BW. As this may influence a parent's choice to enroll in BW I made the decision to interview only non-legacy families to control for this possible bias. Given the opportunity and the emphasis on the success of Catholic schools with minority students, I chose to interview only parents of minority students (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997). The goal was to interview fifteen parents: five who chose to enroll at BW, five who chose a charter school, and five who chose a public school.

Participants. I made phone calls to the families to ask some preliminary questions to see if they fit the criteria given above. If so, I presented the purpose of the research to the families, emphasizing that this was for my own educational purposes and while my finding may influence future BW practices it would not have any effect on their current relationship with BW. Between the two academic years or enrollment cycles there were approximately 30 families that identified as minority and did not enroll in BW. As the lists of students who did not enroll was reviewed it became evident that no students enrolled in a charter high school, but that those who did not enroll in an Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas Catholic high school or a public high school had chosen CR. The decision was made to interview students who had enrolled at BW, a

public school, or CR. A total of eleven interviews were completed – four had chosen BW, three CR, and four public schools, including two who enrolled at Sumner. While a larger number of participants would have been ideal I was unable to get confirmation from more. Despite the low number of participants, saturation of data was achieved. All of the participants were women.

Pilot testing of interview questions. In order to gain a better understanding of the quality of my interview questions and interviewing skills I completed two tasks prior to the first interview. The first task was to ask a native Spanish-speaker to review the questions in both English and Spanish and to give feedback on the quality of my translation. My goal was to avoid a situation where I essentially asked two different questions to English- and Spanish-speaking parents. This person was a colleague at BW and thus understood what the essence of the questions was and what type of information I was hoping to gather. She approved of the translations. The second task was to conduct one pilot interview. Due to the limited number of possible participants I was hesitant to conduct more than one pilot interview that would not be included in the final data analysis. This interview provided substantial feedback on my ability to solicit detailed answers from participants. I learned from this pilot interview that I needed to ask follow up questions in order to gather the type of detail and information required for this research project.

Data collection. Data collection took place over the course of eighteen months. This meant that two enrollment cycles were included; students who graduated from eighth grade in May 2014 and those who graduated in May 2015.

Those interviewed were given the option of having it take place at their home, their work or another neutral location. In order to help all participants feel comfortable and willing to share I did not offer my office at BW as an option. Once I was no longer employed at BW I did offer

my new work location as an option. Of the eleven interviews conducted one was completed at the interviewee's place of work, six in the interviewees' homes, one in a coffee shop, and two at my office at the Catholic grade school. It resulted that one interview was conducted at BW on a Saturday. This was at the request of the parent.

Babbie (2004) states that a "qualitative interview is essentially a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent" (p. 300). This was the approach taken in the research project. While a predetermined set of questions was used as a guide and the goal was to ensure each of those questions were answered, there was no specific order to the questions or format required of the interviews. There was structure, but not so much that the opportunity for participants to speak freely and openly on other topics was limited. It was the experience of this researcher that participants answered more than one question at a time thus requiring the use of follow-up questions requesting clarification or returning to a previous answer to further explore what had already been stated.

Data Analysis

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), qualitative data analysis takes the researcher from the raw data of the interviews to "clear and convincing answers" to the research questions (p. 190). To accomplish this, the data analysis began with transcribing all the interviews, organizing that data, and looking for patterns.

The interviews that took place in English were outsourced to an online transcription service. Once received from the service, these interviews were read through a first time with the voice recording to ensure accuracy. I transcribed the interviews that took place in Spanish. In

the interest of time the Spanish interviews were transcribed directly from the Spanish audio to English print rather than from the Spanish audio to Spanish print and then to English print.

A spreadsheet with basic information on each participant was created. This spreadsheet included at which high school the child on whom this study focused was enrolled, if it was Catholic or non-Catholic, the date the interview took place, and in what language the interview was conducted. All of the interviews were then read through various times to code the information. Coding is done to classify or categorize individual pieces of information by marking the transcript with words or phrases that represent meaning (Babbie, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Open coding was used because no predetermined themes were being looked for (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). Once several themes emerged from the coding process a second spreadsheet was created to organize the themes and who said what each statement. Using Merriam's process for data analysis, these codes were then used to construct categories.

Trustworthiness of the data. As Merriam (2009) states, “the challenge is to construct categories or themes that capture some recurring pattern that cuts across your data” (p. 181). This also lends itself to internal validity. To achieve internal validity I relied on adequate engagement in data collection and researcher's reflexivity. Adequate time spent on collecting data leads to data saturation. Despite participants who chose differently for their child(ren) saturation was noted in the repetition of the themes and statements made by the participants. Furthermore, only two of the participants knew each other before the interviews were conducted, yet many answered in the same way.

The second method used to establish internal validity was researcher's reflexivity. Due to my professional involvement with the Catholic schools in the study I had to be continuously cognizant of any biases or assumptions I may have had. This constant self-reflection allowed me

to think objectively about the data. I believe I was especially able to be unbiased and open to all the data because of the opportunity to learn from the participants' experiences at different schools.

Conclusion

This chapter focuses on the design of the research study; including the site and participant selection, the role of the researcher, data collection, and the procedures for data analysis.

Included in the discussion of data analysis is a description of steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, especially considering my role with the Catholic schools. This study's qualitative approach to the topic ensured that descriptive and thorough data was collected.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Results

In completing this study I interviewed 11 women. While this was initially not the intention to interview only women, it was what transpired. All were minorities. Ten were Latina and one was African-American. All women had children who had recently graduated from one of the five Wyandotte County Catholic elementary schools that feed into the one Catholic high school in the county. All the mothers had a single child who was the focus of this study, except for Yolanda who had twins. For high school, six enrolled their children in Catholic schools and five in public schools. The Catholic schools included BW and CR and the public schools included Sumner as well as TPS. Patricia, Alicia, Amelia, Daniela, Ashley, and Yolanda enrolled their child(ren) in Catholic high schools. Leticia, Sandra, Irene, Laura, and Marta enrolled their child in public schools. For six of the participants the student in question for this study was their oldest child and the first to go to high school. The other five participants had at least one other child who had already graduated from high school or attending high school. The results of this research are divided into three groups: factors considered during the decision making process, gathering of information, and decision makers.

Factors Considered during the Decision-Making Process

Finances. Most of the parents who chose a Catholic high school stated that financing was a major concern. Nine of the eleven mothers would have preferred a Catholic high school for the student on which this study focused. The two who were open to the possibility of a non-Catholic high school for the student on which this study focused had older children already attending public schools. Based on their comments it appears that when they went through the decision-making process with their oldest children, they would have preferred a Catholic school

at that time. Therefore, at some point all the parents preferred a Catholic high school for their children. Of the six who eventually enrolled their child(ren) in Catholic schools, only one did not mention the tuition as a concern when choosing a school and two indicated it was a concern, but not to the extent it was for the remaining five.

It was also clear that those parents who eventually chose CR did so because of the lower tuition costs when compared to the tuition costs of BW. For some of the families the difference in monthly tuition payments was up to \$300. They believed CR offered the same benefits as BW, but at a much lower price. This was made evident by Patricia. She had initially enrolled her daughter at CR after much research and consideration. However, shortly before classes were to begin she reconsidered and enrolled her daughter at BW. Regarding the difference in cost between BW and CR, Patricia stated, “a free private school for their kids” in reference to parents she knew who had chosen CR instead of BW or another private school. Patricia was also the most educated of the women interviewed and this contributed greatly to her actively comparing the information available from both schools. She not only took into account what she learned in conversation with others, but also compared information published in brochures, flyers, on the school websites, and on the websites for the respective state departments of education. When asked why she initially chose CR over BW she responded,

To be honest it was the scholarships...When I had everything in front of me, because I did, I sat down and I compared data...It's comparable, BW and CR, to be honest with you. It's very comparable, but which one was the better...in the end I looked at the tuition, the fees and all of that. That's why I decided to go with CR.

This sentiment was shared by other parents as well. Tuition costs were such a concern for Alicia, whose son enrolled at CR, that when talking to other parents about various schools when

she was in the process of choosing a high school, she only asked about tuition. All other factors were not as important as she made a decision. In her opinion, she could tell when a school was good or not, as indicated by her statement “I know a good school is a good school.” The schools she considered all had strong academic reputations and a variety of opportunities for their students. Therefore, she was not concerned with these factors, but focused on the financial costs of each school. She was interested in learning from others what they paid in tuition and admitted not speaking to BW employees regarding tuition. It was in this way that she discovered that families with students at BW, including her brother, paid around \$320-\$350 a month and families at CR paid between \$20-\$50 a month. She stated, “I know it’s a good school, but I don’t have the means that they have,” to explain why she felt her brother could afford BW and she could not. She went on to say, “And, also money influenced a lot. And, that had a lot to do with it. Over [at CR] it wasn’t much that we would have to pay....if you are going to pay \$50 it’s only a little bit.”

Amelia, whose daughter also enrolled at CR, indicated that BW was, for both her and her daughter, a “dream” school, “but the cost was too much for [her].” Amelia had the same opinion when asked what factors contributed to her choosing CR over BW. While there were several factors she considered, she said, “...above all that I don’t have to pay because well, I don’t have the [means] to pay another school.” Later on when asked again about her motives for choosing CR and not BW, Amelia states, “Because of the cost. The truth is that’s the only reason.” Her belief was that tuition payments at BW would be “impossible” for her. Like Alicia, she was greatly influenced by what other parents shared with her regarding their experiences. Based on this information she also did not feel the need to speak to any employees of BW herself. In her words,

And they did say that they had scholarships and everything, but honestly I never went, because the people who had children there said the scholarships were minimal and they were all complaining about the payments. And I said, 'I don't want to be in that situation.'

Amelia and Alicia also expressed that their children were fully aware of the role finances played in the decision. Alicia's son let her know that he understood they did not have the means to pay BW and she should not have "to spend when it's not necessary," meaning with CR as an option it wasn't necessary to pay BW tuition. Amelia also stated that her daughter let her know that she knew the family was unable to afford BW and that she had accepted CR as the school she would attend.

Ashley and Yolanda, whose children both enrolled at BW, mentioned finances, but not in as much detail as the other parents did. Ashley mentioned that she had spoken with the then president of BW and had been assured the school would work with her to "make sure that my kids went to school there, no matter what." She also stated that the Business Office had "always worked with [her] with the payment process..." Yolanda mentioned that she had researched other schools, including another Archdiocese Catholic school. This other school had a higher tuition rate than BW and she was unable to afford it. She also mentioned that she knew CR was "cheaper," but due to transportation concerns it was not a viable option.

Daniela, who enrolled her son at BW and for whom finances were not a concern did appear to have the opinion that the tuition costs were a reflection of the quality of the school. In her opinion, paying a significantly lower amount to attend CR meant that the students were receiving less of an education and preparation for the future. She asked, "honestly, is it just the price that attracts parents?" and stated, "Literally, it's like twenty bucks a month. That's

nothing.” In her opinion BW offered a stronger academic program because the tuition costs were higher.

Those parents who enrolled their children in public schools also made comments about tuition. Irene, whose son enrolled at Sumner, described how her and her husband explained to their son that Catholic school was simply not an option financially because of a new baby and an older brother in college:

We explained to him that he was going to high school and we weren't sure how much we were going to pay in tuition and we were going to have another baby and that was going to be more expenses and well, he understood....It scared me to send him [to BW] and then not be able to make the payments

They considered both BW and CR. They decided against CR despite its lower tuition rates because of transportation concerns. Laura also mentioned tuition as a reason she considered public schools over Catholic schools and did eventually enroll her daughter in Sumner. Laura's concern was that she had a younger son in the 7th grade and wanted to be able to keep them together. She said, "... the money was an issue for them to go to a [Catholic] high school. I wasn't able to pay for both of them, and I had to decide either one or the other. I didn't think it was fair, so I was like 'You are both going to go to public school.'" Sandra likewise mentioned tuition as a factor when considering schools. When explaining that they had considered BW, she stated they "didn't do [BW] because money-wise, because it seemed like it's more higher than going [to grade school]...it's not going to work money-wise." Marta said that they had considered her son continuing on to BW, but that "he would not be able to because [she] did not have the budget." Her son also did not do well academically at school and he had made the comment, "what's the point in paying for me if even though I try I don't learn anything."

Leticia's son enrolled at Sumner, but she also mentioned tuition as a factor when considering high schools. She said that, "the main thing was money." She went on to explain, "Honestly, public school was an automatic, because we make too much to qualify for any financial aid and so having four children in Catholic school without any financial aid would've just been way too expensive." Her family's situation is different in that they did not have the same limited finances as the other families, but they also would not have been able to comfortably afford tuition at a Catholic high school.

It was concluded from the statements made by the parents who chose a Catholic high school that finances played a significant role when making a decision about high school. For three of the parents, CR seemed like the logical choice because it offered all the benefits of a Catholic school, but without the usual price-tag. It can also be concluded that these three parents might have chosen BW had the tuition costs been more manageable for their financial means and all other factors between the schools remained constant. It also obvious that those families who eventually chose a public school also considered finances as an important factor.

Academics. The topic of academic programming was another important factor for the parents. In this study academic programming refers to the perceived rigor of the classes offered, extracurricular activities available, and college preparatory focus. Based on participant responses a college preparatory focus included help with the college admissions process including college applications and scholarship applications. The overall theme among the comment on academic programming was that parents believe Catholic schools have strong academic programming. This appeared to be of great importance to those parents who did choose Catholic schools. They wanted and appreciated what Catholic schools had to offer in terms of academic rigor and opportunities. Those parents who chose public schools appeared

less concerned with this factor. One indication of this was how frequently the parents whose children enrolled in Catholic schools mentioned college preparatory features of the Catholic schools. One exception came from those who selected Sumner, a magnet school within the public school district to which students must be accepted and that has academic programming different from the TPS. The two participants who had children at Sumner spoke highly of the academic programming and expectations at Sumner. Only one of the parents who had a child at the TPS spoke about academic programs, the other two made no mention of academics elements of the public school.

Patricia was the most descriptive when discussing the academic programs available at BW, CR, and Sumner. Her daughter originally enrolled at CR, but transferred to BW before classes even began her freshman year. She stated early on that all her children would attend college, that it was “not an option.” Due to this goal, she looked closely at what each of the schools offered in terms of academic programming that would assist the children in reaching college. At both CR and BW she looked at whether or not the school offered college credits. She asked: How many of those students who obtained a high school diploma actually move on to college or are accepted at a university,” to which universities they were accepted, and the “education level of the teachers.” For Patricia, it was important that her children not only go to college, but a four-year college and not a junior or community college. Patricia also commented on the actual instruction her child would receive at whichever school she chose. Patricia felt that classes at BW were more advanced than high school classes and resembled college level courses.

The other three parents with children who enrolled at BW mentioned the school’s academic programming, but not to the extent or detail that Patricia did. Two of them, Daniela and Ashley also stated that college credits BW offered through a nearby community college were

an important factor for them. Ashley also mentioned that her two oldest had first become acquainted with BW through their Dual Enrollment at Ward, a program which brings eighth grade students to the high school for an algebra class. Students must take a readiness test while still in seventh grade to gain admission to the class. The class is offered to students at four of the Catholic grade schools in Wyandotte County. The fifth grade school has their own algebra class thus did not have a need to take advantage of this program. When discussing the high academic expectations BW has for its students, Yolanda described how the school requires students with failing grades to attend after-school tutoring. For her, this meant that the school deemed it important that all student succeed academically. Although Amelia's own daughter had enrolled at CR, she did comment on the strength of the academics at BW when she said she knew that the "majority of the graduates go on to college."

Amelia and Alicia both had students attending CR and in each of their interviews they both quickly mentioned the college scholarships CR students receive. Alicia also stated, "And I say it has to be something about the Catholic schools that help those who want to study more. They instill something different." She went on to say, "I think they receive more education in Catholic schools. That's my opinion." Amelia also said it was important to her that CR had credit requirements that would help "them with college."

Sandra and Marta both had children attending the TPS, but both also had positive remarks regarding the academics of the Catholic schools. Quoting an older son and not the child who was entering high school, Sandra stated,

He told me, to him, when he went to the public school, it was a lot easier, because Catholic schools, they're a grade ahead of the public schools. He said not only that,

they're more at a slower pace than the Catholic school...He was telling me that to him, when he went to the high school, it was more easier because it was a slower pace.

She went on to say, "He said to him it seemed like high school was easier because some of the stuff he already knew from the Catholic school." Furthermore, Sandra also commented on the academic expectations at CR explaining, "CR is really good, but I know you have to keep your grades up in order to participate, and if they start slipping and if you can't get them back up, they will ask you to leave." Marta was honest that her and her son did not feel he was academically strong enough for CR or BW. She explained that "his grades [were] not very good" and that she heard CR was for "smart kids." While this is a judgement on her son's abilities, it does also indicate her opinion that Catholic schools had high academic expectations.

Irene and Laura commented on the academic expectations at Sumner. While Leticia's son was the focus of this study and was entering a TPS, she had older children who had attended Sumner and also had comments on the academic expectations of the school. Irene commented about Sumner that, "they help [the students] come out ahead. The push them to maintain that level of grades." She continued,

I liked how the principal talked to them about how they had a place there because of their good grades and I liked a lot how he talked to them, that he told them they needed to maintain their grades...Because they push them to have to good grades so they stay and because not just anyone gets in. They also have to maintain high grades or they kick them out....they earn the spot.

Laura simply commented that the academic expectations of and classes at Sumner are "a challenge" for her daughter. Leticia also commented on the policy that if grades do not meet standards and are not improved in a timely manner students are asked to withdraw from Sumner

and enroll elsewhere. Leticia made a comparison between Sumner and TPSs when she said, “once we heard all the good things about Sumner, that really reinforced that, ‘Oh gosh, there can be another good school. It’s not going to be Catholic, but it’s also accredited and then some.’”

The statements made by the parents during their interviews showed that, for the most part, Catholic schools are seen as having stronger academic programming compared to public schools. The exception would be Sumner, a magnet school with acceptance requirements. Overall, this perception was held by those who chose Catholic schools as well as those who did not.

Faith. At some point, all the parents involved in this study had chosen Catholic education for their children. The faith formation provided by Catholic schools did play a role in the decision-making process when it came to electing a high school, but it did not appear to play as significant a role as other factors. While all the parents mentioned religious faith during the interviews, it was not always among the first factors listed when asked what they considered when choosing high schools. For the purpose of this study *faith formation* refers to any instruction, guidance, or activities the students have access to at a Catholic school. These include, but are not limited to, daily religion class and prayer, weekly school Mass, field trips with a religious purpose, and vocation exploration.

Of those who eventually chose BW, Yolanda and Ashley mentioned faith formation early on in their interviews. When asked what factors were important to her when considering a high school, Ashley mentioned faith almost immediately saying, “the religious aspect of it. I felt that they still need that, and they always do, so that weighed in quite a bit.” Yolanda stated that she was “hoping, and I believe, that the religion will stay with the kids, that they see it daily here...” While Daniela seemed to feel strongly about BW’s proximity and connection to her own parish

she did not mention this until the second half of her interview. She eventually stated, “This is our church. It’s our church too. That is also another big factor with me choosing BW, because it belongs to St. Peter’s. I want to support our parish also.” Patricia also mentioned faith formation, saying, “as well as the religion,” only after she had listed several other factors she was considering when choosing a high school. She continued explaining that she believed the students, “were respectful...because of the religious part being an integral part of the school, like what the expectations were as a Christian.”

Of the parents who chose CR, faith formation seemed to have a stronger impact on Alicia and Amelia. Alicia indicated that for her receiving a Catholic education was “nice,” because the students learn to pray and “behave in an educated way.” She went on to explain that she was especially excited when she learned that CR was also a Catholic school. She stated,

I didn’t know anything about CR, I had never even heard it mentioned until my son started to...that there was a school in Missouri he understood to be a good school. That it was Catholic and for me I really liked that it was Catholic because, well, I don’t know...I’ve really liked the education that they [the Catholics] have given him. And that made me really happy when he said, ‘no, It’s Catholic’... and so we went and asked about it.

In a similar way, Amelia described the importance of a Catholic education saying, “For me as a Catholic, it’s important that my children know that God exists. And before making a bad decision they will stop and think.” She believed the ability to make sound decisions was based on teachings gained in a Catholic school. Irene also mentioned faith formation, but like Daniela, only later on in the interview and when asked what she liked about BW. She answered that she liked that BW was “a Catholic school. And for us it was important that he was close to God and

that he would be in a Catholic environment.” She then answered that he would receive this at CR too.

Of the four parents who eventually chose public schools, three mentioned the faith formation of Catholic schools when asked what factors they considered during the decision-making process. Laura’s response was simple and straightforward, “Of course they teach you religion. That’s the reason why you’re there.” Similarly, Sandra stated, “I was thinking Bishop Ward, because it would further her Catholic education, because I know they don’t get that in public schools.” Marta explained what she liked about BW saying, “the way it’s a Catholic school, that’s the religion we are, so that’s why my impulse was to go there...And in addition to that, we belong to a group within the Catholic church and others there have their kids there [BW] and they have good habits within their family. I thought about that.” Despite eventually choosing public schools for their children, it was apparent that these parents still valued the faith formation received at Catholic schools.

Leticia, whose son enrolled at Sumner, was the only parent who openly stated that religious education was not as significant a factor as others. She said, “Honestly, the religious aspect wasn’t something that I had to take into play, ...Honestly, for the religious side of it, I think the biggest part is what you teach them in your home, so that, to me, wasn’t why they have to go to a Catholic school.” Later on in the interview she again explained,

I know for some people, the biggest thing is helping their children to continue their faith, but for, like I said, once again, I think our biggest teacher is us, in the home, so it wouldn’t matter where my children go. They’re going to get it at home, even if they didn’t go to a Catholic school.

Based on the information here it is clear that all parents were aware of the faith formation available at Catholic schools, but it was not necessarily the first factor they considered during the decision-making process. All the participants considered several factors, faith formation being one. Despite having chosen Catholic schools at one point for grade school, it was not the most important factor when choosing a high school.

Differences between public and Catholic schools. The role faith formation played when parents were choosing a high school was described earlier. In this section, faith formation is once again discussed, but in regards to the difference between Catholic schools and public schools. Several differences were mentioned, faith formation being mentioned most often. Another difference mentioned was that public schools have more resources than Catholic schools, thus allowing for more opportunities in terms of athletics, arts, clubs, and extracurricular activities.

It is not surprising that those parents who eventually enrolled their students in Catholic high schools indicated that the difference between Catholic schools and public schools was the faith formation. According to Ashley, whose son enrolled at BW:

... but it's the individual on the inside that matters when they're in Catholic school. It's the type of person that they become, their characteristics, the love of God that they have, the respect that they have for others and themselves. I think that's what the difference is.

Amelia, whose daughter became a student at CR, had a very similar statement:

I feel like the public schools are very good schools because if a child wants to learn they will, but they are not as strict and they don't give them moral education, they focus on studies, but there isn't personal attention...they don't teach that we need to behave correctly in all areas.

Yolanda very simply stated about faith formation, “here [at BW], it’s encouraged. It’s not just encouraged, it’s part of what goes on here.” Patricia stated, “I think that I really like the fact that they can practice their beliefs and their religion during school.” Daniela said the difference is that “they’re more around their faith, their religion...” Alicia remarked about the Catholic schools, “...I like how they teach them to pray, to behave in an educated way, to be nice.”

Sandra and Marta, both with children who enrolled at TPSs, also indicated that the difference between the two types of schools was faith formation. Marta stated, “they teach them spiritual things. They teach them about the Bible, they talk to them about the lives of the saints.” Sandra indicated the difference saying, “religious-wise it helps them because they don’t get that in public schools...they steer them in the right direction and teach them what they are supposed to do, should do.” Leticia, whose child also enrolled at a TPS explained that for her, the faith formation was not a significant factor, but she knew “for some people, the biggest thing is helping their children continue their faith” and this cannot happen in the same way at a public school that it does at a Catholic school.” Laura was the only person to not explicitly mention faith formation as a difference between Catholic schools and public schools.

Yolanda, Laura, Leticia, and Sandra did share that they felt a difference between the two types of schools that reflected positively on public schools was that they had more resources to draw from, allowing them to have more extra-curricular opportunities and in-school services. Yolanda specifically mentioned Title services (academic support for those in need) and that at the Catholic school there had been difficulty in acquiring these for one of her daughters. She explained how at her daughter’s Catholic elementary school, “they have to go through the public schools to get the help that they need...” While this was said in reference to services available at the elementary school, BW did not have similar services available to students during the regular

school day. Laura spoke to the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at Sumner as well as orchestra and other clubs and activities now available to her daughter. Referring to the IB program, she said, “Sumner has really good things too like the [IB program]...” Leticia also mentioned the IB program and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. The IB program and AP classes are not available at BW or CR. Sandra commented on the athletic programs available at the public high schools.

Patricia and Leticia stated the size of public schools was a strength. While they both appreciated the personal attention that comes with small classes both also said it could be a weakness. Patricia felt that everyone knew each other, especially those who had been together since the primary grades. Patricia said, “I think those are the bad things about small communities, people who know each other.” Leticia indicated that she appreciated the diversity that came with attending a larger school when she stated,

I like the fact that they were actually going to get out and grow a little bit more.

Something bigger...I just think there's more diversity in a public school. I really do. I mean I know there's people of all colors at Catholic school, but I think also diversity of ...you just get more diversity if everyone's not Catholic...I think that plays a role with -
I just want my kids to be exposed to everything.

Some parents indicated that safety and discipline at public schools were a concern for them and a difference between Catholic and public schools. Daniela, Amelia, Marta, and Laura commented on this topic. They were concerned about reports that the public schools had gangs and violence. Amelia stated that she had heard “students who are in the 6th grade [were] already in gangs.” Marta commented that, “you hear a lot in the news that there are fights between

students, that they take weapons, or that they even take drugs.” None of the parents indicated these were concerns they had with Catholic schools.

The responses of the parents indicated that the major difference between Catholic schools was faith formation. The conclusion is that parents felt faith formation contributed to the respectful and orderly behavior parents stated was present at Catholic schools at a higher frequency than in public schools. Catholic schools were also perceived to have fewer concerns with fights, weapons, and drugs. The public schools though had more resources that allowed them to have more class and activities opportunities.

Hopes for student in four years and ten years. Each participant was asked to describe what they wanted for their child(ren) in four years and then in ten years. Of the eleven participants, 8 specifically mentioned college. Of these eight, all had children currently in Catholic high schools, Sumner, or had older children who had attended Sumner. Of the three who did not specifically mention college, two had students currently at traditional high schools and the other had children at BW.

When asked what she wanted for her daughter who enrolled at BW in four years, Patricia was the most emphatic saying that all her children would go to college. Her statement was, “Veronica will graduate from high school with honors and scholarships. She will support her education at a four year university....She will be in college somewhere.” Patricia continued to say, “by her senior year of high school she would have decided on a discipline. She would have scholarships. She would have decided on a university. A plan, her five year plan...” Patricia also stated that she intended all her children to obtain at least a Master’s degree, because she wanted her children to complete as much, if not more, education than she had. Daniela also spoke specifically about degrees earned, saying that she hoped through the BW college credit

program her son would be close to, if not completely, done with his Associate's degree upon graduation from BW. She also said, "I really want him to have a decision on what his career is going to be...I need him to start looking at college already." Ashley also stated right away during the interview, "I want him to, of course, be in college....I also want him to know what he wants to major in, in college." When asked what they wanted for their children in ten years they mentioned other life events such as family and children of their own, in addition to having completed their college degrees.

Each parent was also asked what role they believed the high school to play in their children accomplishing these goals. Patricia stated,

I expect BW to help my child learn how to prepare herself for college...I expect Veronica to have the classes that she needs and the credits that she needs to continue on to a four-year university and to provide her additionally with the support she needs...if she needs whatever to help her get that diploma and move on.

Daniela felt that the high school had the "biggest role," because "that's where they decide what they're going to want to do. Their high school is the main source for them deciding what their career is going to be, what their college is going to be, what they're going to grow up to be." Likewise, Ashley said the high school, "plays a huge role in [her son] accomplishing his goals. Or the goals I want for him."

Amelia and Alicia both had students at CR and also mentioned college. Amelia indicated that she wanted her daughter to be "dedicated to her studies" and that "in four years that she knows how to make a decision about college." Alicia was less direct about mentioning college, but did say she hoped that God would allow "him to study a profession...that he has a good education." In ten years Amelia hoped her daughter had moved on to a professional career and

Alicia that her son had completed his degree or was well on his way to completing it. Amelia felt that CR's role in helping her daughter accomplish these goals was based on the school "always motivating them to keep studying and that the most important [thing] is your studies." She also made a comment that there was a staff member whose responsibility it was to work with the students on achieving these goals. From her description, this person was likely a guidance or college counselor. Alicia used the analogy that the high school was "like a set of stairs that helps [the students] rise step by step" to describe the role the high school plays in future accomplishments. In her opinion the school has "a lot to do with it."

For both Irene and Laura, the child who was the focus of this study was enrolled at Sumner. For Leticia, the child who was the focus of the study was enrolled at a traditional public high school, but she had experienced Sumner with her two oldest children. All three parents also explicitly mentioned college when describing what they wanted for their children in four and ten years.

Irene stated that she wanted her son to finish high school and "also start college." In ten years she hoped that her son was finishing college and was a "professional." Additionally, she mentioned life events such as marriage and children of his own. Laura specified a state university as the one in which she hoped her daughter enrolled. In ten years she also mentioned that she wanted her daughter to be completing her college education. Other hopes Laura had for her daughter included traveling. Leticia was clear that she knew from having multiple children that they are all individuals. For this reason she seemed slightly hesitant to only name college as a goal for her son, instead saying that based on his interests she thought "he would, if not be starting a college, than at least [starting] some type of technical school." In ten years she wanted him to be a "productive man."

In response to what role the high school played in achieving the desired goals, Irene believed the school had a “100%” role, that the school “has everything,” to do with it. Her examples included the entrance requirements and lack of behavioral problems as opposed to academic programs or guidance counseling. Laura and Leticia did not specify if they felt the high school had a role.

Marta and Sandra both had children attending TPSs. Yolanda had twins attending BW. These parents did not mention college when describing what they wanted for their children in four and ten years. When asked about her daughter, Sandra mentioned personality traits and characteristics she hoped to see her daughter develop in four years. She stated hoping her daughter was less focused on what her friends were thinking or doing, that she knew she was important and that she was able to “support herself.” She went on to say she hoped her daughter would develop “more self-confidence, not putting herself down...Hopefully meet more positive friends...pretty much more self-confidence.” Her goals for her daughter in ten years were similar. In ten years she wanted her daughter to find a “field she’s comfortable in and can help her grow and learn more in life.” Sandra did not specify what role she believed the school to have in helping her daughter accomplish these goals in ten years. Yolanda spoke about her twins and the hopes she had for them separately. For her daughter she hoped that in four years she had, “something to do with school.” Like Sandra, she also mentioned personality traits and personal characteristics. She said, “I want her to know that...She is important. What happens to her is [sic] important than what her friends have to do.” In ten years she hoped her daughter was “able to support herself and take care of herself.” When talking about what she wanted for son in four years, Yolanda answered, “I see [him] possibly already [sic] have a goal, already know what he wants to do and hopefully he’s headed towards that goal he has, a good goal.” In ten

years she hoped, “he’s accomplished his goal, that he’s already [sic] a lot going on.” When pushed for specifics on what kind of goals she had for her son she answered for both children saying she hoped they were “still headed towards God.” When describing the role the school has in achieving any of these goals she only commented on the tutoring services available to those with failing grades. Marta wanted her son to have a career, “that he graduates.” She continued saying, “in four years that he doesn’t graduate and end up getting a job at McDonald’s or Wendy’s, no that he does something good for himself.” In ten years she mentioned having children of his own, but also that he would have “something more, something bigger.” When asked what she meant by this, she explained, “more professional, that if he wants to form a family...that he has his own job, or saves some money, or he does something good, something good for himself, for his family...That he is never without.” In regards to what role the high school had in these goals, she first stated, “the truth is I don’t know how to answer you, because no....no, no I don’t know how to respond to that question.” She went on to say that the school does prepare the students, but that he also needed to show effort.

From these responses it is obvious that those parents with children currently or even previously in high schools with a college preparatory focus hoped that goals for their children would include college. Those with only experience at TPSs were less likely to mention college as a goal. This is not to say it was not a goal, only that it was not mentioned. This may or may not be a result of the schools the students attended. There was only one parent, Alicia, who explicitly stated that she believed Catholic schools, “instill something different” in their students. Alicia’s son enrolled in a Catholic high school. Similarly, Patricia was very vocal about what goals she had for her children and was therefore possibly more receptive to messages from BW about college. Ashley on the other hand suggested that students at TPSs are also capable of

going on to college when she said, “even in public school a lot of kids have opportunities if they have the goal to go out and get those opportunities for themselves...” It is difficult to make any connection between what role the school has in goal-setting compared to what role self-selection among students and/or parents plays. BW, CR, and Sumner all regularly message to students and families the importance of going to college and offer programs and opportunities aimed at helping students gain acceptance and scholarships to college. BW and CR also make it significant part of their recruiting and marketing materials, which are intended for the students as much as the families. Both schools boast graduation rates, college-acceptance rates, and college credits earned while in high school in their recruiting and marketing materials. For these reasons it is important to consider whether or not it is the school that affects to some degree what parents hope for their child’s future.

Gathering of Information

When gathering information on the various schools during the decision-making process the parents often consulted two groups: friends and family and school employees.

Influence of family and friends. When discussing the process of choosing a high school for their 8th grade student, a prominent theme that developed was that the mothers reached out to others for information and opinions on various high schools. Of the 11 mothers interviewed, only one did not mention talking to others. Two of the mothers mentioned talking to teachers or acquaintances, while the other eight talked to family and friends. In this study *friends* are loosely defined and can include someone the mothers worked with, interacted with as a result of school functions, or simply knew as another parent at the Catholic grade schools their children attended. For two mothers it appeared they did this because they were not confident enough in their English-language abilities to communicate with school personnel. For all those who did gather

information from family and friends it was evident this information was strongly considered when making decisions. Talking to others was an action taken by both mothers who chose a Catholic school and those who did not.

When analyzing the statements of the parents who chose Catholic schools, it became obvious that the parents relied on the input of others when making a decision. The input came from family members and friends who had children already enrolled at the schools being considered. Patricia was not a typical parent in the sense that she herself was more educated than any of the other mothers and completed more active research. She not only gathered information from family and friends, but also spoke to personnel at both CR and BW, as well as researched the schools online. In regards to listening to family and friends to gather information she said it was partially due to the fact that school personnel were “going to say all of this great stuff in regards to their school and the academics and the student body, but at the end of the day, the real stories, the families are the one that can tell you their true experience.” She went on to say that,

If you sit down and you to talk to five different people you can kind of gather similarities, even if people exaggerate, you can compare the stories...What am I hearing that is standing out about each and every one of the conversations that I had with these families? I believe they tell you the truth.

Patricia made it a point to talk to families from the various schools she was considering. She spoke to “parents who had children at BW, to parents who had kids at Sumner, and then people who know people who attend Sumner, siblings that attended Sumner Academy. CR as well... families from [daughter’s Catholic grade school] and other people that I’ve met...” Patricia also took initiative in reaching out to these families. She asked for contact information and sent text messages resulting in face-to-face conversations or approached other parents at

school sporting events. Patricia's approach was very purposeful. Amelia was another parent who was intentional in seeking out information. She worked with another woman whose daughter had graduated from CR. Amelia explained, "One woman I sought out because she had her daughter there. And, I asked her what she thought about the school and she told me that she was very happy because her daughter had graduated and she always had good grades and that it was a good school."

Amelia also mentioned being "offered" information indicating that some was gathered in a less intentional manner. This was the case for several of the other mothers. For example, they gathered information from family members, but these conversations were not planned. Amelia indicated that friends "offered" information with statements such as, "Oh, I have a friend who had their children there..." and would go on to make statements about the school, in this case CR. Irene, Yolanda, and Alicia all indicated that they had family members who were currently attending or had attended one of the schools other than the one at which they eventually enrolled their child(ren). It was through conversations with family that they gathered information about the different schools. As Irene, who eventually enrolled her son at Sumner, stated she learned about the school, "from my family. And, for CR also from my family." In speaking to her brother specifically about Sumner she learned that "they were also very happy with that school." Irene admitted her interest in enrolling her oldest son at Sumner came from her conversations with her family. Several times Alicia, who enrolled her son at CR, mentioned that she has asked her brother specifically about tuition at BW. While her brother shared with her what he paid in tuition he also told her his opinion of the school saying, "Send him there, it's a good school." Alicia valued the information she gathered from others as well saying she had a positive opinion about BW because her niece attended the school, but she "didn't know [CR]. I only knew what

people would tell me.” Yolanda did not appear to have as many conversations as other parents but did indicate that she spoke to her parents when making the decision to send her twins to BW. Two of Yolanda’s own siblings had attended BW and she felt her parent’s input was therefore valuable. She did mention others she knew besides her brother who attended BW, but did not elaborate on conversations with them to gather information that affected her decision.

Sandra did not receive information from the same sources as the others. She has an older child who was already enrolled and doing well at a TPS. She knew early on that she would also send her daughter to the TPS to be with her son. Due to the family moving from one area to another, she found herself with the possibility of choosing one public school over another (both in the same district). This led her to look into both schools and while visiting what would be a new school for her family she did ask teachers, counselors, and current students their opinions of the school. Much like Patricia, her opinion was that students are “going to have a different answer to what the teachers or the principals say. I figured you get more information from the students because they’re actually going there and experiencing it. They may tell little bits and stuff.” For this reason, during her visit to the school Sandra made it a point to ask several students who happened to be sitting outside for their opinions about the school. She felt this information would be more factual and honest than that gathered from school employees.

Laura, Ashley, and Daniela only spoke briefly about talking to others to gain information about the various schools. Laura stated repeatedly that she did her own research and only once that she learned information from another parent. This was after she had already chosen Sumner for her older son and had decided to also send her daughter (the 8th grader) so that they were together at the same school. When she learned from this parent that the students at CR worked one day a week to help pay for their tuition she said, “Really, I wish that I could [have] known

that. Otherwise, I would have sent them probably to CR.” Ashley mentioned that she talked to other parents “sometimes” and that the 8th grade teacher “had a little bit to do with the process” of choosing BW for her second child. However, her oldest was already a student at BW and this had the greatest influence on her decision. Daniela did not actively seek out information, but rather seemed to gather some informally from a family member with a son at CR. Her response to learning how little they paid in tuition indicated that she equated the cost of tuition with the quality of the education.

Those parents who chose public schools also valued information gathered from family and friends. Leticia indicated that she was not from the area and therefore had no knowledge of her own of any of the schools in the area. As a result she indicated her and her husband were “going off what everybody else [told] them” and this was how they knew about the schools. Marta indicated a similar experience in that she spoke to other parents in the neighborhood to learn about the schools. She stated in terms of the TPS, “Well, I know people who live around here and I already knew that’s the school for this area. For example, right here lives a friend, here next door, we went to ask them.” Marta also indicated that she did not talk to any school employees when making a decision; that she only spoke with, “friends who knew children at the different schools.” Even when her and her family first moved to the neighborhood where they currently live, the opinion of those around them was vital to the decision to enroll the children in Catholic elementary schools and to at least attend Catholic schools up to the eighth grade. This was made evident when talking about the area public school she said, “In this area, a friend we have did not recommend the schools. She’s been living here longer and she didn’t recommend the schools, so we decided to take them to Catholic schools.” From the experiences of both mothers it is obvious that what others with prior experience thought was important and played a

role in the decision-making process. This resulted in both parents initially enrolling their children in Catholic elementary schools. Both parents eventually chose public high schools.

Participants were not directly asked whether or not the people they spoke to were of the same racial or ethnic background. However, it can be inferred that for six of the participants the family and friends they spoke to were of the same racial or ethnic background. These six participants and the family and friends they spoke to were Latino. Patricia indicated she spoke to people in both English and Spanish. Alicia, Daniela, Irene, and Yolanda indicated they spoke to family members. Amelia, Alicia and Irene indicated speaking to other Spanish-speakers who were not Spanish-speakers.

With the exception of one parent who did not consult with anyone regarding the decision of which high school to choose for her child, it is obvious that the other parents all gathered information from family and/or friends. Some did so to a greater extent than others.

School employees. From the data presented above it is obvious that the parents spend considerable time talking to family and friends. As a group, about half of the participants also spoke to school employees. Contact between the parents and school employees can be classified into three categories: those who had intentional contact in the form of meetings or appointments, those who had informal conversations during events such as Open House, and those who had no contact. Of those who did have contact, all but one spoke English only or were Spanish/English bilingual suggesting that a language barrier may have been one reason so few spoke with school employees.

Patricia, Ashley, Laura, Alicia, and Amelia all had intentional conversations with school employees. It is important to note that at both CR and BW there are presidents, principals, and an admissions staff. Parents had contact with various members of the staff. As has been noted

before Patricia was the most educated of the parents interviewed and the most active in researching the schools. Patricia spoke to admissions employees at both CR and BW. She stated about the representative from BW,

I think it was Mrs. Gonzalez that clarified many things for me, because I was communicating with her....I just knew she was kind of the contact person for me. So, I would just go back to her. I kind of figure out who the contact person is and it was her at that time when she was there so I would communicate directly with her. Things kind of worked out.

When explaining her contact with representatives of CR she said that she had received a home visit from one person, but had also made an appointment to go to the school to meet with a recruiter. Ashley explained that she had meetings with the president of BW. She stated, "I had meetings with [him]. At least two or three during the summer pertaining to tuition, scholarships, how he was going to make sure that my kids went to school there, no matter what." Laura also had contact with the BW president to talk about tuition and it was these conversations that lead to her decision that she would not be able to afford to send her children there. Alicia spoke with a member of the admissions staff at CR who spoke is Spanish/English bilingual. This is notable as Alicia did also mention that her "English is very little" and this often limited her ability to speak to school personnel. During this visit the admissions staff member gave her a tour of the school and spoke to her about tuition and scholarships. Amelia indicated that she "never went to see any of the schools." She specifically stated in terms of BW that, "they [the school] did say that they had scholarships and everything but honestly I never went, because the people who had children there said the scholarships were minimal and they were complaining about the payments." However, later in the interview she does say that she spoke to the business manager

at the school to discuss tuition and tuition payments. Amelia also specifically mentioned the language barrier and therefore making a decision based on “what I heard.” Sandra also spoke to school employees. She described visiting the public school and talking to teachers and counselors about “how they try to...the trouble kids, keep them in line and try to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

Daniela only spoke to school personnel after having already decided to enroll her son at BW. Daniela explained visiting the school after she had already decided to send her son to BW and going to Enrollment Night. She said, “I went to enrollment night...That was actually the first time I was there.” She asked someone if she could accompany her son through the first day, but could not remember who it was saying, “I don’t know who it was.”

Leticia, Marta, Yolanda and Irene did not mention having any contact with school employees that resulted in conversations during which they gained information about the schools. Leticia and Irene did mention attending Open House or other similar events during the decision making process, but not speaking to school employees during these events. Marta did not visit any of the schools. When asked her response was, “no, no.” Yolanda also did not mention ever talking to anyone at any of the schools before making a decision.

The data indicates that some of the mothers did speak to school employees. It also suggests that for a few of the mothers, there was a language barrier keeping them from speaking to school employees. Overall, the contact with schools may have included attendance at a recruitment event, such as Open House, if not a personal meeting with a school employee.

Marketing and visits. Considering the number of participants who said that they spoke to others as their main source of information on high schools, it is not surprising that many did not refer to marketing materials or visit the schools during the decision making process. Any

visits that did take place often took place after the students had been accepted and/or enrolled in their school of choice.

Four of the parents - Irene, Alicia, Patricia, and Amelia - stated that they visited CR only after their child had been accepted. Patricia described it saying, "I just went to CR because those events were, they happened after Veronica was accepted and stuff so it was after the fact so I just felt like I was committed to that." Amelia also only visited CR only after her daughter had been accepted. Similarly, Alicia said that she "only went a few days before enrollment to see where the school was." Irene described the event she went to as an Open House, "when you go and see the school." Daniela also only visited BW after her son had been accepted. Her first visit was the evening event where parents go to enroll their child(ren) in classes. Leticia explained that she did not visit any schools with her child who was in eight grade at the time of this study, but did with her oldest child. However, she did indicate that she visited Sumner only after her oldest child had been accepted to Sumner and attended the orientation activities. Irene had also visited Sumner only after her oldest had been accepted. Leticia and Irene were the only two who visited Sumner. Ashley, Daniela, Yolanda enrolled their children at BW and reported that they never visited CR. Laura enrolled her son at Sumner and indicated she never visited CR. Leticia, Sandra, and Marta enrolled their children in TPSs and said they did not visit CR.

Three of the parents visited schools before their child was accepted and/or enrolled. For two of the parents these visits occurred with their oldest child. While Leticia indicated that she only visited Sumner after her oldest had been accepted and enrolled, she had also visited BW during the decision-making process. Leticia, who eventually enrolled her son in a TPS, stated that the then pastor of the elementary school encouraged her to look at BW and she thus visited the school. Ashley had also visited BW with her oldest child and also at the encouragement of

the then pastor of the Catholic elementary school both of her son attended. Ashley explained that one of the reasons for her visit was to speak to the staff of the Business Office about financial aid and scholarship options. Likewise, Laura visited BW and Bishop Miede in order to discuss finances with staff members. Neither Ashley nor Laura felt the need to visit the schools to learn more about the school itself. They were confident the schools were acceptable for the children, but were unsure about the financial aspect of sending their children there. Alicia and Patricia never visited BW. Patricia stated that she “didn’t have any interest in going to Bishop Ward” considering at the time she had already committed to CR. Later when she decided against CR she did visit BW to enroll her daughter in classes.

Sandra’s older son was already attending the TPS. By the time her daughter was to enroll in high school the family had moved and it was possible she would have to attend a different public school based on their new address and school zones within the district. Sandra said she did visit the other public school in order to learn more about it. This visit was not part of an event such as an Open House or orientation. During this time she visited with teachers, counselors and asked students waiting outside for their rides what they thought of the school.

In regards to any marketing materials available in print or published online, five parents indicated that they did not look at any materials when making a decision about high school. Sandra, Alicia, Leticia, Marta, and Amelia were the parents who did not refer to any printed or online marketing materials. Three of the parents stated that they looked at information available online. Patricia was the parent who looked most in depth at the information available. She sought out information specifically on CR and BW and looked at various websites. Not only did she look at information available on the school websites, but she also looked at information available on other sites. In her words, “I looked at that annual reports. I looked at there is just a

... I don't remember the website, but there are several websites that provide that information because data can just be...edited." It was determined that one of these other sites was that of the state education department. Due to her concern that the information available through the schools was edited in favor the schools, she "compared data" with these other sites. Laura looked at the website greatschools.com to find information on the area public schools. It was in this way that she learned Sumner was ranked highly nationally and the TPS her son would have attended did not have positive reviews. She stated, "Well, the reviews were really good [about Sumner]. I knew that it was one of the top schools nationally. It was number seven back then." She also stated that she, "decided to just send them to Sumner because [she] checked the reviews online, and [she] though that was the best option around [them]." Yolanda and Daniela also looked online, but not to the extent as Patricia and Laura. Yolanda looked at the Bishop Miege website mostly for information on their financial aid options. When explaining why she did not do much research into other schools beyond looking at CR online, Daniela explained, "Honestly, if he would have told me that he didn't want to go to BW then I would have had to look at another school...then I would have done my research on them. The fact that BW already had such a good reputation, that's one of the reasons that I didn't feel the need to go in there and look at anything else."

Only three parents, Ashley, Irene, and Patricia, looked at printed marketing materials. All three referred to the brochures, flyers, and paperwork that BW gave to the students at school or mailed home. Ashley said, "I looked at them, yes...they were always sending home different pamphlets and stuff. Then I would get things in the mail."

As can be noted based on this data, the visits and available marketing materials did not appear to have any significant impact on the feelings the parents had toward any of the schools

during the decision making process. Visits occurred after students had been accepted and overall only about half looked at marketing materials in print form or online.

Decision makers. During the interviews the mothers were asked how they made the final decision about which school the students would attend. In answering this question directly or through answers given throughout the interview, it was obvious that in most cases, their children (the student in question) had opinions and input about where they wanted to go to high school. However, the parents were largely the ones who made the final decision. Input from and opinions of the students were based mostly on the social factor of where their friends were going. The students in two of the families appeared to focus on academics more than social factors. During three of the interviews the opinions and input of the students were not mentioned. Another trend that surfaced was that for all but two families the fathers had little to no role in the decision.

For those students who expressed an interest about which school they wanted to attend, the reason was almost always that they had friends who would be attending and a desire to continue on with those friends. Amelia, Irene, Patricia, Yolanda, Daniela, and Alicia all had children who wanted to attend their initial high school preference because they had friends who would be attending. A variation of the phrase, “he/she had friends going there” was made by all these families. Friends were enough of a concern for Patricia’s daughter that she changed her mind from wanting to go BW to CR when friends started to enroll at the latter. Yolanda’s daughter was also very vocal saying that she desired a public school because they are larger than Catholic schools. When Yolanda said that non-Catholic schools were not an option, the daughter then started asking about BM because it was a larger Catholic school. Leticia indicated that her son’s preference for a TPS was not based specifically on friends, but on another aspect of social

dynamics. She stated, “I think for him, the biggest thing was he didn’t feel there would be bullying there [where].” Only Ashley’s interview was missing any reference to her son mentioning social factors as a reason for wanting to attend BW. She did indicate that her son was interested in the school for academic reasons. She explained that her son had taken part in the algebra class for 8th grade students and that the class, “weighed in quite a bit...that he knew that he wanted to go to BW.” Alicia mentioned her son’s friends, but was also focused on the academic programming. When asked why he wanted to take the placement tests at various schools, her son stated, “It’s that I have to choose the best, the one that I think is the best.” Her son was also active in soliciting information about different schools from friends and families.

Despite the students having opinions and giving some input, the final decision was almost always made by a parent, mostly the mother. Only two families mentioned the father being involved in the decision. Patricia explained that she gathered information to show to her daughter and husband, but also simply stated, “Well, I’m the one that makes the decisions.” Patricia had originally enrolled her daughter at CR, but explained,

At the end, I thought about everything that had occurred during the orientation. I had already kind of made my mind up how I wanted to proceed...I was already thinking about changing; withdrawing her from CR and applying to BW. The final decision I guess was just me, and then I just convinced everybody else.

Amelia has a similar experience in how she made the decision and then informed her husband. When asked about who made the final decision, Amelia answered, “I think it was me. Yes, I mentioned it to my husband, but the decision was mine...I just told him so that he would know.” Yolanda mentioned that the father and older brothers of the twins indicated the twins should not attend BW. She also explained that her parents gave input into the decision, that they “talked

about it” together. However, ultimately, when answering who made the final decision, she stated, “It was me.” Daniela answered that she did ask [son] if he wanted to “try out” CR, but that he responded he was content with going to BW. [Son’s] father does not live in the same state and she indicated that he feels “whatever I decide is going to be the best.” Sandra and Laura were among the participants who did not indicate the child had much of a role in the process. Laura answered, “I would say myself” when asked who made the decision. Sandra’s response was, “Me, I very much made decisions for all of them.” Ashley joked that she would use not sending them to the school of their choice when disciplining her two oldest children with statements such as, ‘if you don’t do what you’re supposed to do, I don’t know if you’re going to BW.’ Despite the jokes, she described her role in the decision-making saying, “But, then of course, with their grades being so phenomenal, they were very, very high achievers, both of them. I felt like I couldn’t deny them that. I couldn’t deny them not to go to a school they love so much.”

For all of the families above, either the mother specifically mentioned the father was not part of the decision or there was no mention of the father having a role. The two mothers that did specifically mention the fathers being involved were Leticia and Irene. In answering who played a role in the final decision Leticia said, “Both. My husband and I.” Irene explained, “Well, me and my husband...”

There were three mothers who specifically mentioned the student having a role in the decision. One was Alicia, who explained the following when asked who made the final decision about her son attending CR,

Well, more than anything, [son]. Some influenced him, but he’s the one who decided, he said, ‘Where should I go?’ and [I said], ‘It’s your decision, where you think you will be

best.’ And, I told him, you can’t go there for a time and then decide, ‘Nah, I don’t want it [anymore], take me someplace else. You’re not going to be able to do that. For that reason, decide well.’

Marta said that the decision for her son to attend the TPS rested largely with him. When it came time to register for the placement test at BW he let her know, “No, mommy....what’s the point in paying for me...if even though I try I don’t learn anything.” This was a reference to her son not having the same high grades as other students applying to BW or CR. She concluded, “It was his decision...”

From this data it can be concluded that the parents, specifically the mothers, are the ones who for the most part made the final decisions. The mothers listened to preferences the child(ren) voiced, but for all but two it was ultimately the mothers who made the decisions.

Conclusion

This chapter discusses in depth the results of the eleven interviews conducted. Participant comments highlighted the themes of finances, academic programming, and faith formation as topics considered when making a decision about what high school to choose for their child(ren). The results also gave insight into what is most important to the participants during this decision process as well as how they gather information and what information they use when going through the decision making process. Another theme found in the data focuses on the hopes and dreams the participants had for their children in the future. Lastly, the results provided information on who in the family is considered the decision-making. All the data presented here help to further understand the decision-making process of minority mothers when choosing whether or not to enroll their child(ren) in a Catholic high school. The data detailed here and discussed in the next chapter provide much needed insight.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors influencing the decision-making process that families undertake when choosing a high school for their child(ren) enrolled in Catholic elementary schools. Data were collected through eleven interviews with mothers of minority students transitioning from a Catholic elementary school in Kansas City to various types of high schools. Of the eleven participants, seven eventually enrolled their children in Catholic schools and four enrolled their children in public schools. Overall, the participants seemed pleased with their decisions and did not show any indication of transferring their students. The one exception was Patricia who transferred her daughter before classes started her freshman year. Six of the participants appeared to feel this was a significant decision for them. This is based on their attitudes during the interviews, as well as comments and efforts put into learning about the different schools. Of these six, five were in the process of making this decision for their oldest child, which were the first to go to high school. Four did not seem to think of it as a significant decision. Of these four, all but one was making this decision for a younger child, so they had already gone through this process at least once. At the onset of the decision-making process, be it with this student or an older student, the parents all preferred a Catholic high school over a public high school. Two of the parents who were going through the decision-making process during this study with a younger child were tracking towards public schools from the start. Those who had older children were open to the possibility of a non-Catholic school with the child on which this study focused. At the beginning of the study, it was not the intention to interview only women, but they were the ones who responded to the requests for interviews.

This chapter discusses the findings. First, a brief overview of the major findings is provided, followed by discussions of the findings, major conclusions, limitations of the study, implications of the study, recommendations for further research, and a conclusion to the study.

Overview of Major Findings

The most prevalent major finding was that the women, by and large, gathered most of their information from family and friends rather than from marketing materials published by the schools or conversations with school employees. This was their preferred method of gathering information. A second major finding was that finances were the most important factor considered when making a decision, more important than faith development or the academic programming of the school. The results of this study indicate that the factors considered when choosing to enroll or not enroll in a Catholic high school were, in order of most to least important, financial considerations, academic programming, and faith formation. A third finding of this study was that mostly it was the mothers in this study who made the final decisions regarding where to enroll their child(ren). Charter schools and the sex abuse scandal that rocked the Catholic church were not found to be factors, as they were never mentioned by any of the participants. This was a finding by omission.

Gathering information. Among the most important findings of this study is that decisions were influenced by relationships and personal interactions more so than marketing materials provided by the schools or visits to the schools. Word of mouth was more important than the printed word. All but one participant was Latina, the other being African-American. This study showed that Latina mothers will most often look to family and friends when seeking information during the high school decision-making process. The African-American mother did not speak to family and friends as much as the Latina mothers. In contrast, she was more likely

to speak to school employees to get information about which school to choose. This major finding of this study focuses on the Latina mothers and their actions. At a time when the Latino population in the United States is growing quickly, knowing how and where Latina mothers gather information in the process of making important decisions is imperative. Knowing that the Latina participants turned to family and friends for information is vital to any recruiting and marketing efforts a Catholic school undertakes. Many Catholic schools spend considerable energy and resources on printed marketing materials, such as pamphlets and flyers. These were rarely referenced by the mothers in this study. Instead the Latina participants were seeking out personal interactions during which information was shared. The results presented here suggest that Catholic schools need to start focusing more energy and resources on making sure that key information being shared during face-to face interactions is true and that the schools are portrayed in a positive way. Furthermore, the results show that about half of the participants took the information they received from family and friends at face-value and did not investigate further. Some did not talk to school employees because they believed they had all of the information necessary to make a good decision. This meant that those participants who did not speak with school employees potentially missed important information regarding any aspect of the school, especially financial considerations. Knowing more information, such as payment plans or scholarship opportunities, may have helped families be more at ease about the tuition rates.

Chapman (1982) looked at the process involved in choosing a college and his findings are relevant here. His research was from the perspective of the student and not the parent(s). However, Chapman does conclude that there are student characteristics and external influences involved in the choice process. Those external influences include significant people in the

student's life such as parents/family, friends, and high school personnel. Chapman (1982) states that the input of those external influences can affect the expectations of a particular school and "offer direct advice as to where the student should go to" (p. 495). These scenarios took place in this study. Families and friends helped established expectations of the high school and offered direct advice. This study indicates that external influences were significant to the participants. The participants here, although parents and not students, also relied heavily on input from others, most often from family and friends.

A potential response by Catholic schools to this finding would be recruitment and retention programs that focus on spreading information via word of mouth as opposed to printed material. The word of mouth approach does not consist of formal presentations or school tours, but rather emphasizes casual conversations as opportunities to share information. One such program is the "Madrinas Model: Attracting Latino Families to Your Catholic Schools" developed by the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) at the University of Notre Dame. In Spanish *madrina* translates to "godmother." In the Catholic religion the role of godmother or godparent is taken very seriously. This person is expected to be there for the child throughout his or her life and during major life events, offering help in various forms as needed. One way to help is to offer advice and suggestions on any number of topics. It is not surprising that this relationship is seen as a model for recruiting and retaining Latino families. According to the Madrinas Model program guide, *madrinas* "serve as liaisons, ambassadors, and translators between Catholic schools and Latino families in the community" (ACE, 2015, p. 8). The program "seeks to alleviate tension, or lack of effective communication, between these two institutions and to build a bridge from the parish to the school for Latino families" (ACE, 2015, p. 12). Also according to the program guide, this program has led to increased enrollment

among Latino families in several (arch)dioceses, including Chicago, Cincinnati, New York, and Toledo, among others (ACE, 2015, p. 8).

Financial considerations. A second finding of this study was the role that financial concerns play during the decision-making process. All but one of the parents indicated during the interviews that they had limited financial resources (albeit this is relative), meaning that they could not easily afford an expense such as tuition, even if they wanted a Catholic education for their children. In fact, of the eleven participants, ten mentioned finances and their concern about whether or not they would be able to afford a Catholic education. Due to the fact that Catholic schools traditionally charge tuition, this meant that the families would potentially take on an added financial responsibility they could not afford easily. Suhy (2012) came to comparable conclusions in that the participants of that study considered Catholic schools to be cost prohibitive for Latino parents. Participants answered that it would be necessary to take on a second or third job in order to afford a Catholic education (p. 286). Mainda (2002) found that the availability of financial aid played an important role in whether or not parents chose to enroll their children in religious schools. Most of the participants at some point during the decision-making process sought out information on tuition costs. This information greatly influenced their decisions because they were getting the information from a second-hand source and not directly from the schools. The participants often looked to family and friends for information on how much they paid in tuition and used this to inform their decision about whether or not to enroll at a Catholic school or at which Catholic school to enroll. This is directly related to Chapman's (1982) conclusion that the comments of external influences contribute to the expectations a family will have of the new school (p. 495). As noted in the results, several participants never spoke to employees of the schools. This means that they could have

prohibited themselves from learning valuable information regarding financial assistance with tuition costs. In the case of BW and CR, tuition assistance is based on family income. There are also numerous scholarships available, as well as payment options. However, families who never sought out this information directly from the schools may have only heard about what one family with a particular income was paying. This amount may have been affordable for that family, but not for the family in the process of making a decision. Not speaking to a school employee meant that they continued through the process with only this information at hand. In the end, this process of gathering information appears to have lead families to choose CR over BW.

That families in this study chose CR over BW is significant, but also not surprising. Those parents who found CR to be an affordable alternative felt their children would receive faith formation and have access to strong academic programming, but at a price that they could more comfortably afford compared to BW. This attitude of the parents is reflected in four of the ten CR Mission Effectiveness Standards: Is explicitly Catholic in mission and enjoys Church approval, Serves only economically disadvantaged students...Shall prepare all of its students to enter and graduate from college. While parents were not specifically asked about their socio-economic status it can be concluded from their comments that most would be considered economically disadvantaged, the very families CR strives to serve. Why the parents chose CR is reflected in the school's standards and how they make a Catholic high school education affordable and attainable. As Patricia, one of the participants, stated, "it's the best of both worlds."

Academic considerations. A third major finding is that Catholic schools were perceived by the participants as having strong academic programming, which was considered to include rigorous classes, high expectations, and a college preparatory focus. Nine of the eleven

participants mentioned what they believed to be strong academic programming at Catholic schools, programming stronger than that found at TPSs. Of those nine, seven had children enrolled at Catholic schools. It cannot be determined if this is truly a result of the school promoting and implementing the programming or because those participants were already more aware of academics and more likely to take advantage of academic opportunities. As noted when discussing previous research (Coleman, et al., 1982; Morgan, 2001; Neal, 1997; Nguyen, et al., 2006; Sander & Krautmann, 1995), it is difficult to account for the role self-selection plays in terms of the academic outcomes of students attending Catholic schools. Research shows that Catholic school students, especially minority students in urban areas (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997) are more successful than their counterparts at TPSs. This includes increased high school graduation rates and higher college attendance rates. Despite the use of sophisticated data analysis it is impossible to completely account for the role of self-selection. Likewise, it is difficult to account for the role self-selection plays among parents. Parents must choose to enroll their children in a school other than the TPS to which they are assigned. Choosing to enroll a child in a Catholic school may indicate the parent is highly motivated and already has set high expectations for their child(ren). This study did not account for self-selection among the participants and that must be considered when discussing these results.

The same can be said about comments made regarding the college preparatory programming of the Catholic schools. It is not clear that the parents mentioned this because they entered into the Catholic high school already wanting their children to attend college or because the schools encouraged it. Patricia was one participant who was clear that even before her oldest child started high school she had already decided all her children would attend college. The

same consideration about self-selection and motivation among the parents holds true for answers given when asked what hopes they had for their children in four and ten years. Participants with children in Catholic schools mentioned college more often than those whose children enrolled in TPSs. This could be a reflection of the academic programming at the Catholic schools and the perceived emphasis they place on attending college or it could be a result of highly motivated parents.

The results of Suhy (2012) are relevant to this study in that the parents, mostly Latina women, expressed similar perceptions about Catholic schools and the education they offered. Suhy (2012) also did not account for self-selection and did not differentiate between grade schools or high schools. The parents interviewed by Suhy (2012) perceived the education available at Catholic schools to be “superior” to that available at the schools in the local public school district (p. 282). Although Suhy (2012) did not account for self-selection, he did contend that the participants felt that the education at the Catholic schools “would allow [students] to continue on to college in order to have a more successful life” (p. 287).

What the participants perceived about the academic programming available at Catholic high schools supports previous research on high school graduation rates and college attendance among minority students who attend Catholic high schools. Although there were no interview questions that explicitly addressed the relationship between Catholic schools and minority students, the results presented here support the previous research that Catholic schools are successful with minority students, especially those in urban areas. The comments made by participants are qualitative support of the quantitative data presented in previous research.

Faith formation. Considering faith formation is the one fundamental difference between Catholic schools and public schools, and it is a significant finding that this is not the most

important factor families considered when choosing to enroll or not enroll in a Catholic school. Based on when in the interviews it was mentioned, it does not seem it was as significant a factor as finances or academics. It was, however, the first factor mentioned when participants were asked what they felt were the differences between public schools and Catholic schools. While several differences were mentioned, faith formation at the Catholic schools was the first mentioned most often.

The results of this study are similar, yet at the same time different, to those of Mainda (2002), Ji and Boyatt (2007), and Suhy (2012). Mainda (2002) concluded that for families considering non-secular education for their children, the top three factors, in order from most important to least, were spirituality, financial considerations, and academic programming. The participants in the research of Ji and Boyatt (2007) indicated that faith formation was the most important consideration when enrolling or not enrolling students in Protestant schools. The other two most important factors were academic programming and school safety. While the majority of the participants in the work of Ji and Boyatt (2007) were defined as financially well-off, the study did conclude that for those participants who lived at or below the poverty line religious education was still important and worth the financial burden. The results of this study indicated the same top three factors, but in a different order. The top three factors in this study, in order from most to least important, were financial considerations, academic programming, and faith formation. The majority of the participants in Ji and Boyatt (2007) were financially well-off. The majority of the participants in this study were not. However, those considered at or below the poverty line in Ji and Boyatt (2007) still listed religious education as important and worth the financial burden and the same can be said about the participants of this study.

Suhy (2012) concluded that Catholic schools were perceived as pertinent to the faith formation of students, but were considered cost prohibitive. The participants had a “strong desire to send their children to Catholic schools,” but did not feel they could afford tuition costs (p. 282). They perceived the Catholic schools to be good teachers of the faith and thus increasing the chances that the children would remain Catholic into adulthood. These results are very similar to those of Mainda (2002), Ji and Boyatt (2007) and this study in that faith formation was considered highly important, but the desire to send students to Catholic school was clouded by the financial considerations.

Overall, the participants had the same most important considerations as those in the previous studies, but it is significant that faith formation was not the most important in this study. The conclusion is that the participants were forced to place financial considerations above faith formation, which would be expected to be the most important consideration, because of limited financial resources and the fear that tuition would be too great an expense.

Decision makers. The results of this study indicated that mothers were the main decision makers in this process. It was not the intention to only interview women, but through the purposeful sampling process, they were the ones who responded to the requests for interviews. Interestingly, Suhy (2012) had similar results. To recruit participants, Suhy posted announcements in a variety of places that were accessible to men and women, but it was the women who responded (2012). While the students had some input, in the end it was the mothers who made the decision. In only two of the eleven families did the fathers have any role or input in the decision. Four of the families could be considered single-parent families, as the fathers were not present in the day-to-day activities of the household. It is not surprising that a parent, or both, were the main decision-makers. Mainda (2002) and Ji and Boyatt (2007) did not

specifically address the question of who made the decision regarding where to enroll, but their results only included information gathered from parents. This leads to the conclusion that in those studies it was also the parents who were the main-decision makers. This is not surprising considering that it is the parents who are largely responsible for tuition costs.

These results are important because they provide insight into where Catholic school marketing and recruitment should focus – the mothers. At this time it is not possible to determine if the mothers acting as the main decision-makers is specific to minority families or, more specifically, Latina families. However, the results do indicate that it was the mothers who did most of the work. This means that they were the ones talking to families, friends, and school employees. When visits were made to the schools they are the ones who went. It appears they were also the ones talking it over with the students. The students came to the mothers when they had input and/or preferences.

The results indicate that when it comes to educational decision making, the mothers play a significant role. With regards to education, they appear to be the ones to gather information, to analyze the information and then make final decisions. This includes gathering and analyzing financial information. Several of the participants indicated that they only informed their husbands of the decisions after the fact. It should also be noted that it did not appear that any of the fathers were against the mothers being the driving force behind the decision-making process. The high schools spend time and resources planning and implementing fun activities such as Fun Day and Middle School Night at athletic events to draw in students. The results here show that time and resources should perhaps be spent attracting mothers to the schools.

Major Conclusions

The major conclusions that can be drawn from this study are:

1. In deciding which high school to send their children to, Latino mothers gather most of the information they consider when making this decision from family and friends. This happens through personal interactions.
2. For minority families in this particular area of Kansas City, the most important factor considered when choosing to enroll or not enroll their child(ren) in a Catholic high school is financial considerations. Families are willing to look for the best choice financially among Catholic high schools, assuming that the options have similar academic programs and faith formation opportunities.
3. The second most important factor to these parents is perceptions about academic programming. The participants believe that Catholic high schools have strong academic programming and will prepare their children for college, including those who eventually sent their children to TPSs.
4. The third most important factor influencing the choice of high school was faith formation. While important, it was secondary to financial considerations and academic programming.
5. Mothers are the driving force behind the decision making process. They gather and analyze information, including financial information, before making a decision. Students and fathers may give some input, but it is the mothers who are the decision-makers.

Limitations of this Study

As the study progressed there were several limitations that arose. One limitation was that CR provides limited statistical information to the public. They do not have a school report card with the state department of education, so statistics that were available for the other schools were not available for CR. These include high school graduation rate, attendance rates for 2 year

college, and attendance rates for 4 year colleges, as well as these statistics grouped by race/ethnicity. From their website and social media presence it appears that they have a 100% graduation rate, but what types of college the students attend cannot be ascertained by the social media posts. This is a limitation to this study because it was not possible to compare CR as thoroughly with the other schools since the same data was not available for all the schools. It was possible to compare the high school graduation rates, including by race/ethnicity, of BW, Sumner, and the TPSs, but not of CR. Likewise, it was possible to compare the percentages of students who go on to 2-year and 4-year colleges from each of the schools, but this information was not available for CR. Attempts were made to gather the information from school personnel, but they proved unsuccessful. A complete statistical comparison of all the schools mentioned in this study would have only been possible with this information.

A second limitation was that all but one of the participants were Latina. This study was meant to explore the decision-making process among minority parents and initially the goal was to have as diverse a group of participants as possible. As the study progressed, it happened that I only interviewed women and that all but one were Latina. In hindsight it would have been better to hold racial/ethnic background, as well as gender, constant.

A third limitation was the small number of participants. It would have been ideal to have several more. While there were definite trends in the data, a larger number would have served to reinforce those trends. This limitation is related to the timing of this study. There was only a small window of time during which the interviews could take place to ensure participants answers had not been effected by the students starting at their respective high schools. The ideal time would have been between late May and early August. This would have been right after a decision had been made, but before any opinions or thoughts could be influenced by the

student's attendance at the chosen high school. This limited the amount of time during which I had to conduct the interviews and the result was that several were conducted after the students had started school at their respective schools.

A fourth limitation was not asking families directly about their household income. While many of the participants made comments that gave an indication of their financial status, as I was analyzing data I realized that I would have liked to have had that information given explicitly. Knowing this information would have provided the opportunity to analyze the participant response from another variable. This information could have also created another constant if the incomes had all fallen within an appropriate range.

A possible limitation to this study could have been my relationship to the participants and to the Catholic schools. Although I made every attempt to let the participants know that their responses were confidential and for my educational purposes only it is still impossible to know if they were completely honest and open in their responses. It is possible that my connection to the schools, especially BW, hindered or influenced their responses.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study provide vital information for Catholic schools looking to recruit, enroll, and retain students, as well as parents who are in the process of choosing a high school for their child(ren). As the number of students enrolling in Catholic schools declines across the nation, especially in urban areas, it is important that schools pay attention to what parents consider and how they gather information during the decision-making process. Knowing this could greatly influence how Catholic schools market to potential students. Likewise, the information is important for parents because they could be missing out on information by only gathering information from limited sources.

Recommendations for Catholic high schools. Based on these results, it is recommended that Catholic high schools invest more time, energy, and money into developing parent ambassador programs such as the Madrinas Model developed and promoted by the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) at the University of Notre Dame. The majority of the participants in the study were Latina. The actions of these women give valuable insight into how this particular group gathers information during a decision-making process. It is apparent that Latina parents in the process of choosing a high school pay attention more often and more closely to other parents than they do to school employees or the marketing materials put out by schools. This is not to say that schools should cease to produce marketing materials, but they should be aware that they are not the most effective way of disseminating information.

The Madrinas Program focuses on “marketing, recruiting, and mentoring new families” (ACE, 2015, p. 13). Using this model, Catholic school employees can “gain access to a network of highly-motivated and well-respected Latino parents who are prepared to engage new families throughout the enrollment process, bolstering the school’s marketing efforts...” (ACE, 2015, p. 14). In many ways, this one statement describes and explains what was happening among the Latina participants. They reached out to family and friends who they respected for information. The data suggest that the parents most often sought out information on tuition, which is a factor in the enrollment process. For those parents who were hesitant about the higher tuition costs at BW, the information provided about the lower costs at CR served to boost that schools marketing efforts. For these reasons, Catholic schools should develop parent ambassador programs and should focus on training the ambassadors to give thorough information on financial aid opportunities available to families. Parent ambassadors should also be trained to encourage

families to visit the prospective schools to learn more information about financial aid. Talking to a parent ambassador should not be the last point of contact for a family.

Catholic schools must also be purposeful and intentional with how they use the influence of parent ambassadors. It is not enough to have them out in the community waiting for someone to approach them. The ambassadors should have opportunities for outreach and relationship building that are planned and organized. This is not to say that they should not take advantage of opportunities that arise spontaneously. Furthermore, just as the parent ambassadors should encourage families to visit the schools, the schools should encourage prospective families to visit with the parent ambassadors. At both CR and BW there are already student ambassadors who reach out to prospective students. Interaction with the schools, student ambassadors, and parent ambassadors would provide the prospective families with as much information as possible from a variety of perspectives.

Another implication of this study is the importance of having bilingual staff at the school and ensuring that prospective families are aware of this. The language barrier between the participants and school personnel seemed to be a concern for a few of the participants. This seemed to be among the reasons that they reached out to each other rather than the schools directly. However, for the duration of the study both CR and BW had bilingual staff. So, perhaps the schools need to make this information more widely available. The schools should also provide translations as often as possible of all printed materials, including the school website.

Recommendations for parents. The Catholic schools are the ones trying to recruit more students and reverse the declining enrollment trend. To do this they bear the responsibility of creating effective recruiting programs. However, this study does suggest some recommendations

for parents. It is recommended that parents who are in the process of choosing to enroll or not enroll their child(ren) in Catholic schools speak directly to a school employee and, if available, a trained parent ambassador. Ideally families speak to both, but at the very least directly with a school employee. This will ensure that families receive the most accurate and thorough information. This would include information on financial aid opportunities that non-school employees may not know about.

Parents should also take advantage of the printed marketing materials available. This may be difficult if the information is not translated into the family's dominant language, thus the recommendation that materials be available in different languages. This is also another reason it is important for the schools to have bilingual staff members. If the schools are unable to translate all printed materials then a staff member could help to translate the information in person. It is also recommended that parents visit the schools they are considering before a final decision is made. Visits can be time consuming and difficult to arrange if the parents are working during regular school hours, but there are usually a variety of events held in the evening and on the weekends. Families should make an effort to attend.

Recommendations for future research. This study included interviews from 11 participants. Of those eleven all but one was Latina; the other participant was African-American. Future research could focus on just one of these populations at a time. It would be worthwhile to study just Latinas mothers or just African-Americans mothers. While this study did provide considerable insights into the activities and behaviors of Latina mothers in the process of choosing a high school, it would be beneficial to conduct the same or similar study focusing on just this subgroup. The marketing approaches of businesses are often specific to the demographics they are attempting to reach. The Pew Research Center notes that in 1980 the

Hispanic population of the United States was 14.8 million or 6.5% and in 2014 it was 55 million or 17.3% (Pew Research Center, 2016). The population is expected to continue growing. The Alliance for Catholic Education states that 39% of the Catholics in the United States are Latino. These numbers indicate that it is imperative to Catholic schools that they work to recruit Latino students. Therefore, future research on the specifics of Latinos in the process of choosing to enroll or not enroll in Catholic high schools is needed and worthwhile.

Likewise, further research on the decision-making behaviors of African-American families would be beneficial. While not necessarily a large group within the Catholic religion, as only 5% of all African-Americans identify as Catholic according to the Pew Research Center, they do make up a large portion of urban populations (Pew Research Center, 2009). The US Census Bureau (2015) states that as of 2015, 24.3% of the Wyandotte County population is African-American. Both BW and CR state that they will accept non-Catholic students. The information here shows that African-Americans are another potentially large group of new students for Catholic schools. This is especially important considering research indicates that Catholic schools are successful with minority students in urban areas. Future research into the specifics of their decision-making process is also needed.

A third approach for future research would be to look more closely at who the true decision-makers are, again in the hopes of creating more effective marketing strategies. This research suggested that the mothers are by and large the decision-makers for the family when it came to this decision. Future research could look at whether or not this is true for all race/ethnic groups and if not, who is making the final decisions in other groups.

A fourth consideration for future research would be to look at the choice process for families who move from a public middle school to a Catholic high school. Students attending

Catholic grade schools regularly given brochures, flyers, and other marketing materials. Posters are also distributed to the Catholic grade schools. These materials are not distributed to students enrolled at public middle schools. While it was concluded that the printed marketing materials were not as influential as personal interactions with this particular group of participants it would be of interest to see what, if any, role they have with parents who do not currently have students enrolled in a Catholic school and thus do not regularly have access to these materials. Students already attending Catholic grade schools participate in recruitment events during the regular school day. For example, the grade schools and high school work together to schedule Shadow Days. This is when a prospective students attends a full day of classes with a current high school student to see what a “typical day” at the high school is like. A student enrolled at a public school would have to schedule their own Shadow Day and more than likely miss a day of school to participate. Public middle school students do not have access to the same recruiting events or marketing materials as those attending Catholic grade schools. Therefore, it would valuable to further explore the decision-making process of student who move from a public middle school to a Catholic high school.

Another direction for future research would be to replicate this study in a different county, in particular a wealthier one. The number of Catholic schools and students in suburban areas is also declining across the nation, so conducting this same study in a suburban area would shed light on whether or not the factors considered during the decision-making process are similar. For example, Johnson County (KS) is also part of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, but lies within the boundaries of public school districts that perform better than the one in which BW is located. The majority of the families attending both the public and Catholic schools in Johnson County are also white and the percentage of students participating the federal

nutrition program is not as high. Considering the difference in demographics and the quality of the public schools, it would be informative to explore the factors that parents in this setting consider when choosing to enroll or not enroll in a Catholic high school.

Conclusion

This study was intended as an exploration of parents undergoing the process of choosing to enroll or not enroll their child(ren) in a Catholic high school. Over the last several decades Catholic schools across the United States have experienced declines in the number of students in their classrooms. This has been especially obvious in urban Catholic schools. The Catholic high school in Kansas City, Kansas, is no exception. The hope for the study was to gain some insight into what factors are considered when making a decision and how information is gathered. This study focused on eleven mothers. All but one of the mothers was Latina, the other African American. While the information gained during this study is not sufficient to provide any generalizations for either racial/ethnic group, it does provide insights as to possible new directions that Catholic high schools can take in recruiting new students and reversing the trends of declining enrollment.

Interviews with mothers whose children had recently graduated from the eighth grade at one of the five Catholic elementary schools considered feeder schools for the Catholic high school revealed that the mothers, especially the Latina mothers, gathered the majority of their information from friends and families rather than printed marketing materials. They sought out personal interactions during which information was shared. Talking to the participants also showed that the most important factor when making a decision about where to send their child(ren) for high school was financial concerns. The second most important factor was the perceived academic programming of the Catholic high schools, which was considered to be

strong. The third most important factor was the faith development parents knew their child(ren) would be exposed to at the Catholic high schools. The results of this study tell us that Catholic schools must adopt parent ambassador programs as a means of combating declining enrollment. A purposeful and intentional program that builds on the relational aspect of the communities represented by the participants would be beneficial to Catholic schools.

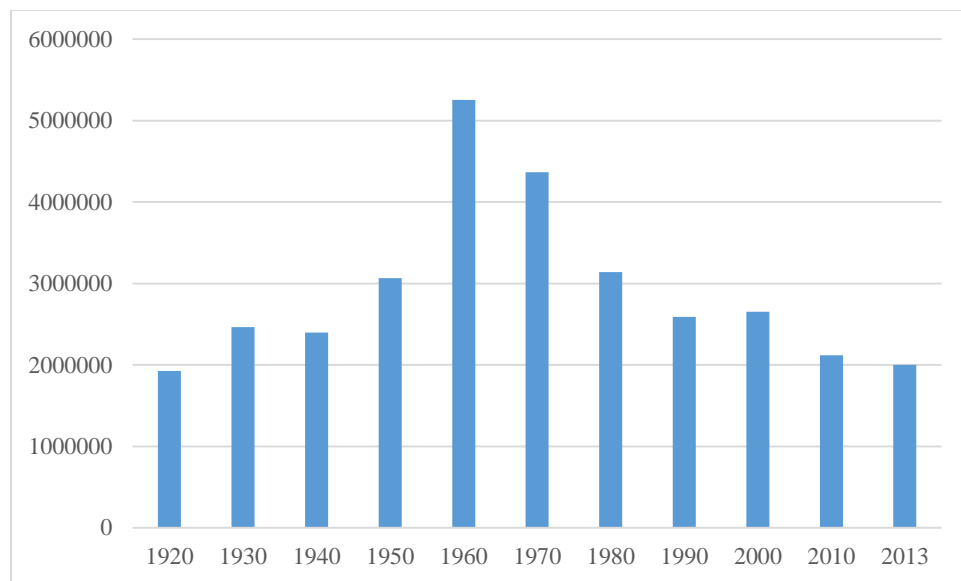
It was difficult not to focus on the Latina mothers as a group because they comprised almost all of the participants. In talking to them throughout the process it was clear that they relied on each other a great deal. This is not to say that the participants all knew each other, but that they relied on other Latinas in their families and communities to achieve the goals they had set for themselves and their families. Many of them spoke about their children going on to college and accomplishing more than they had. Most believed the Catholic schools offered the opportunities and support needed to make their hopes realities. Talking to one another about the schools during the decision-making process was for them essential to finding the best school for their child(ren) and achieving their goals.

This study identified potential future studies. The decline in Catholic school enrollment and the growth of the Latino population in the United States necessitate that we continue to study presence of Latinos in Catholic schools. This is especially true considering that Catholic schools have been said to be especially successful with minority students (Bryk, et al., 1995; Coleman, et al., 1982; Grogger & Neal, 2000; Neal, 1997). The sustainability of the Catholic schools and a population of students could depend on it.

Figures

Figure 1

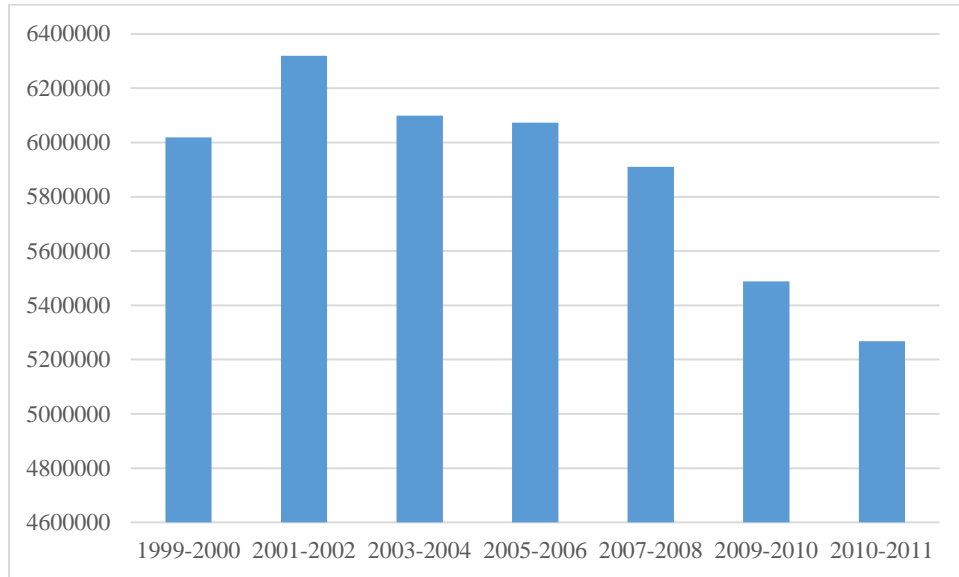
Catholic school enrollment from 1920-2013, National Catholic Education Association



*Source: United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools 2012-2013
The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing*

Figure 2

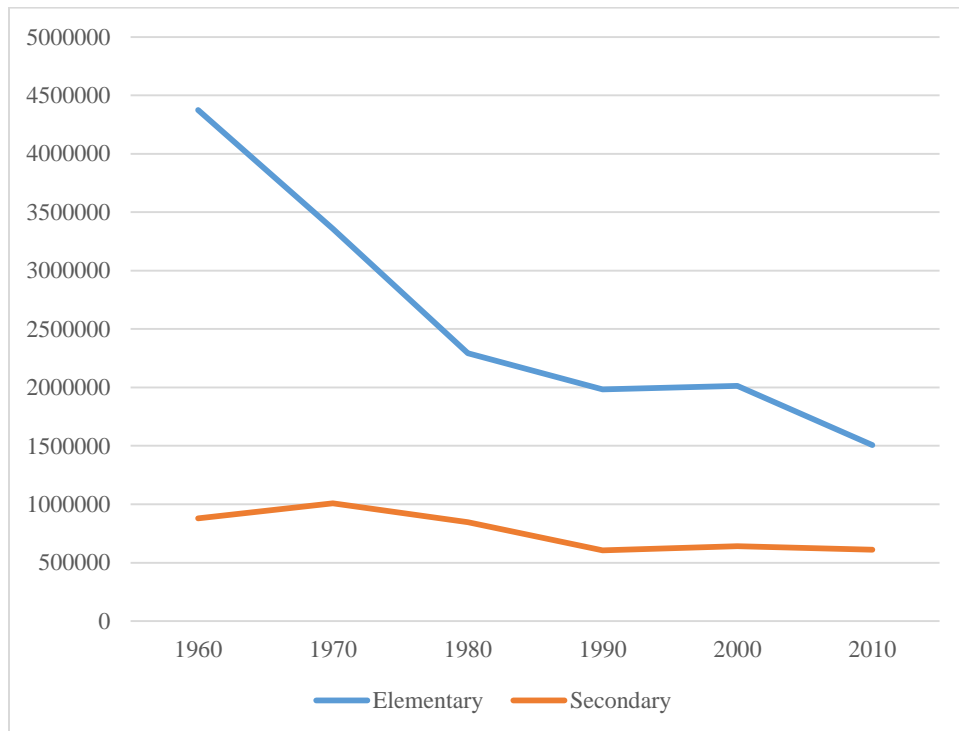
Catholic school enrollment from 1999-2011



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015

Figure 3

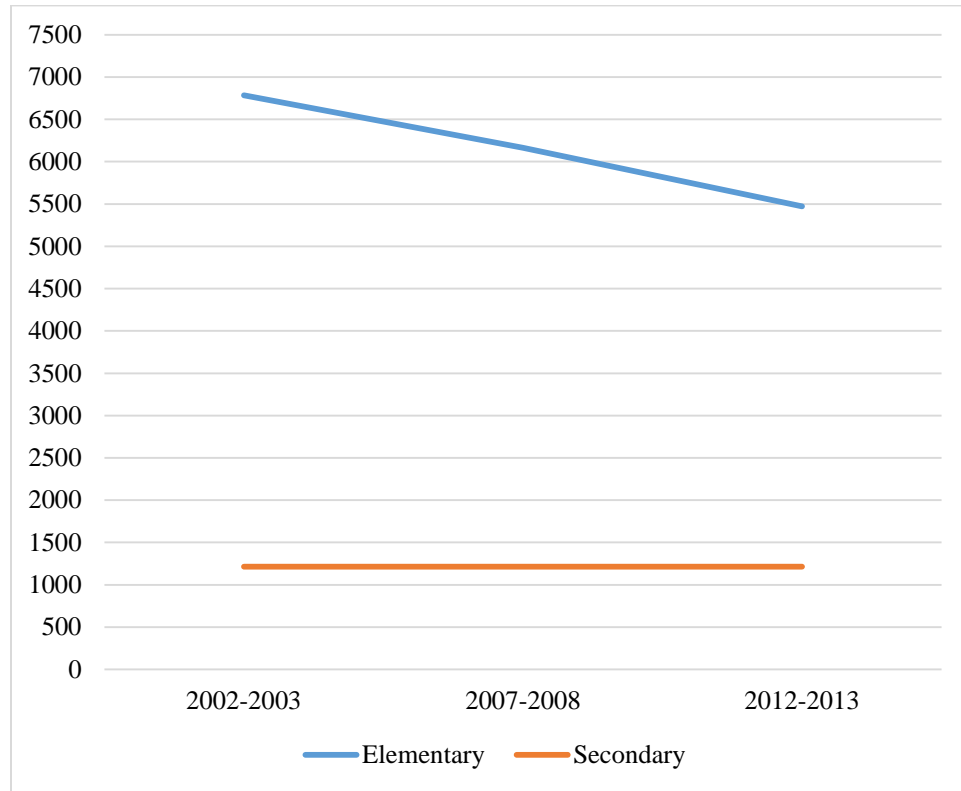
Elementary and secondary Catholic school enrollment



Source: United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools 2012-2013

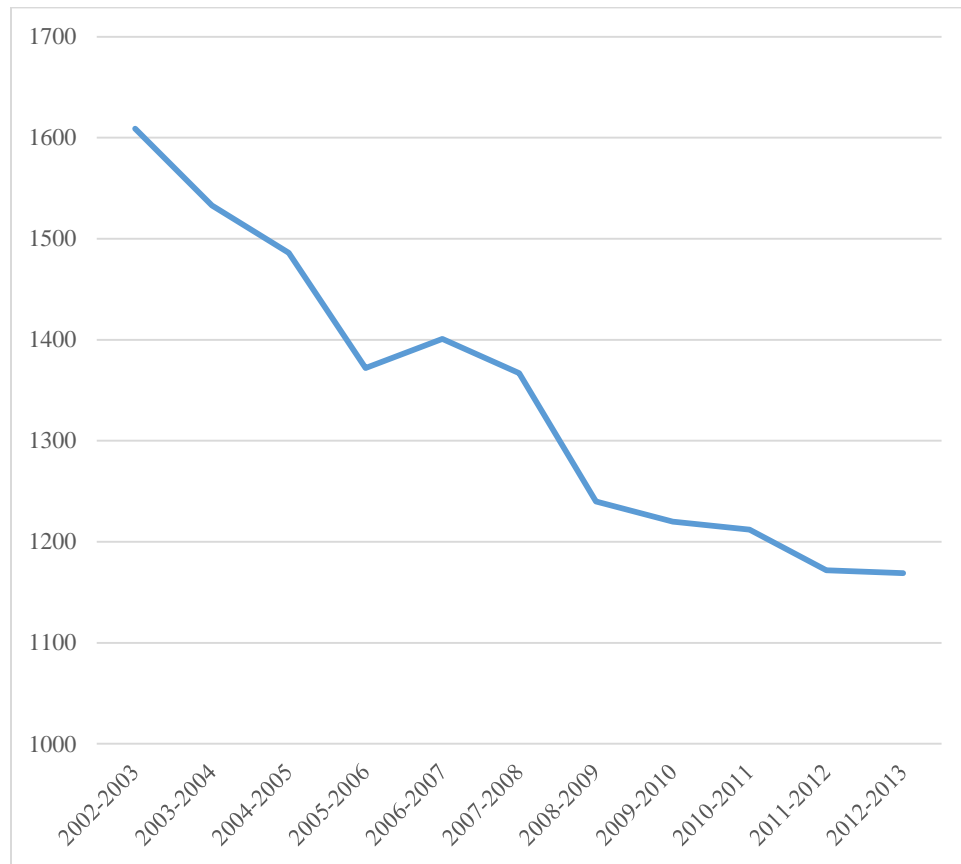
The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing

Figure 4
Number of elementary and secondary Catholic schools



*Source: United States Catholic elementary and secondary schools 2012-2013
The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment and Staffing*

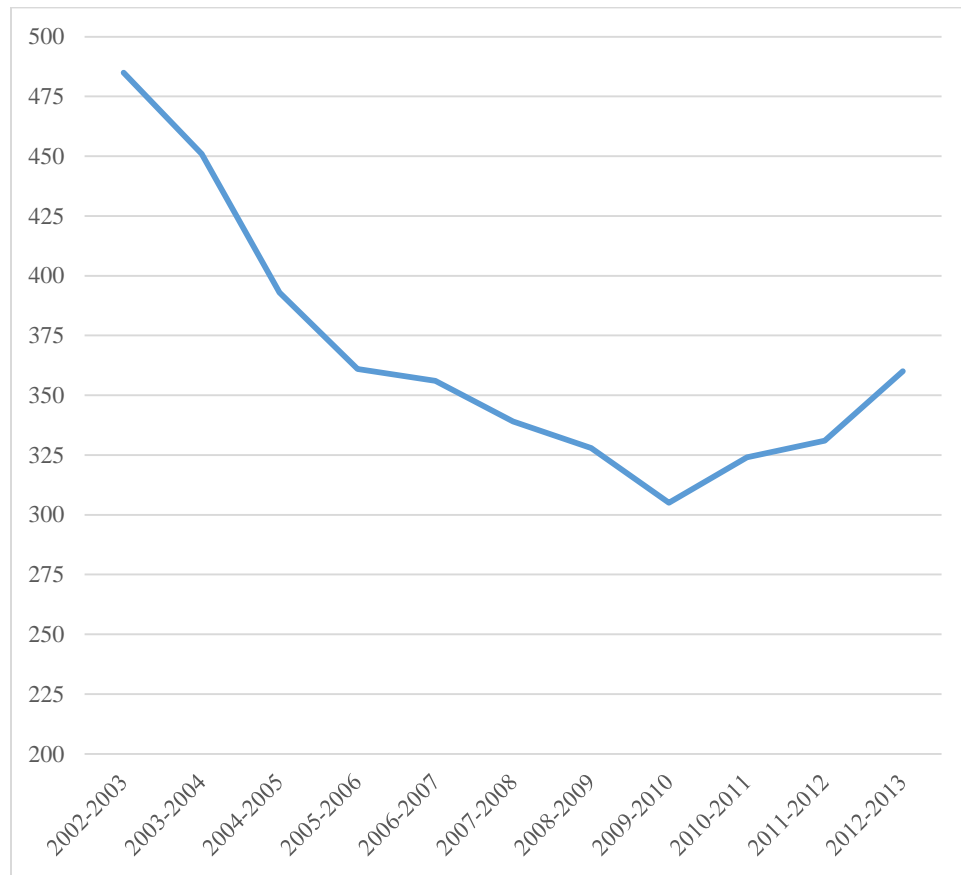
Figure 5
Wyandotte County Catholic elementary enrollment 2002-2013



Source: Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas School Office, 2015

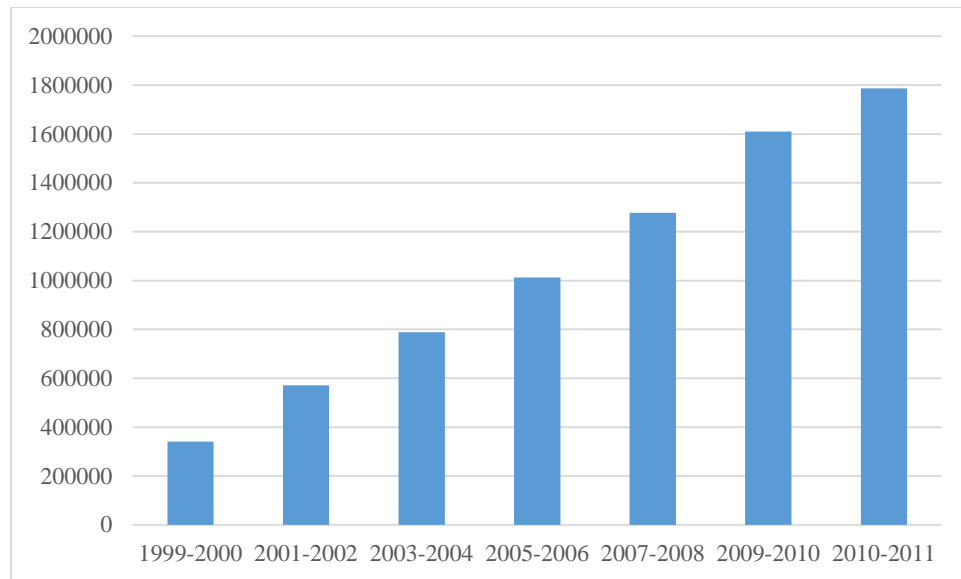
Figure 6

Wyandotte County enrollment for urban Catholic high school 2002-2013



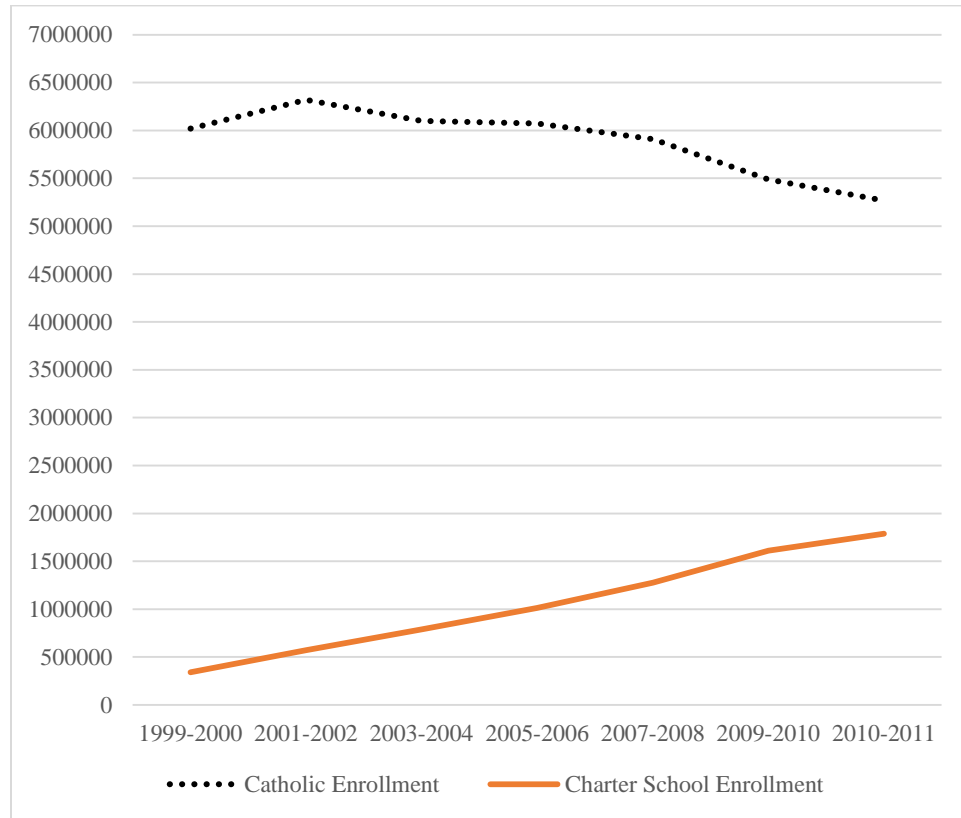
Source: Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas School Office, 2015

Figure 7
Charter school enrollment



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015

Figure 8
Catholic and charter school enrollment, selected years 1991-2011



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015

Interview Protocol

1. You chose SCHOOL XYZ for your student, why did you decide to send your child there?
2. How did you go about choosing a high school for your student?
3. What information did you use to make your decision?
 - a. How did you get that information? Was it given? Was it sought out?
4. Who did you talk to about the decision?
 - a. Did that person contact you or did you contact them?
5. Did you go to (insert recruitment activity)?
6. Who did you consult? What kind of advice did you get?
7. What information did you get from the school?
8. Your child attended a Catholic school at some point, what did you feel were the strengths of that experience? What did you feel were the weaknesses?
9. Were the strengths and weaknesses compared to the one you chose?
10. Did you attend the Catholic high school?
11. What is your connection to the school?
12. How did you choose the Catholic middle school?

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